

# MusicOlomouc 2018

## *An In-Depth Audit of Contemporary Chamber Music*



*Olomouc, a city of a hundred thousand, lies at the very heart of Moravia and is also the cultural centre of the region. One of the many events taking place in this historical – and, most importantly, student – town is the international festival of contemporary music MusicOlomouc, which since 2009 has presented Czech and international premieres of new compositions as well as time-proven works of the musical avant-garde from the mid-20th century onwards, performed by leading Czech and international artists and ensembles.*

The festival is held every autumn, co-organised by the musicology faculty at the Palacký University, which also lends out the concert spaces. The spectacularly decorated Corpus Christi Chapel in the PU Art Centre or the modern roofed atrium adjacent to it – those are some of the traditional homes of new music in Olomouc.

The tenth edition of MusicOlomouc presented a survey of contemporary music in seven concerts that included six world premieres. This year's edition took place between the 9th and 23rd of October 2018 and featured chamber ensembles (one quartet, four trios, one soloist, one chamber orchestra) and traditional instrumentations – only two concerts made use of electronic components and projections.

The audience thus had the opportunity to compare the levels and possibilities of coordination in smaller instrumental combinations. The programme included pieces written between 1957 and 2018, but the vast majority was composed during the course of the last five years.

The opening concert presented **Ensemble Mondrian**, a Swiss piano quartet who visited Olomouc after a two-year break. **Michael Jarrell's** piano trio *Lied ohne Worte* and **Carlo Ciceri's** *Criteria Insorge* were built mostly on the tension of three interlocking lines with somewhat choked instrumental

timbres. **Dieter Ammann's** *Après le silence* was the definite highlight of the programme, as well as a massive portion of music – a twenty-minute collection of an almost incredible number of musical ideas for piano trio. Fragments of rhythms, motives, and processes are presented one after another, usually in only a few seconds. Ammann, however, refuses to backtrack, instead adding further and further sections, both static and rhythmically and dynamically heightened. The composer himself describes this intentionally concentrated creative method as constant movement, the absence of a definitive state, unending gushing, birth, flow, change.

In his piece for piano quartet with scordatura (alternate tunings of the string instruments), **Thomas Wally** used a compositional method of similar freedom. Sometimes similarly exalted, but noticeably less contrasting and full of content, ... *jusqu'à l'aurore...*: *Caprice (IV) bleu* was out-shadowed by Ammann's work. The use of a metal mute on **Ivana Pristašová's** violin was very effective, achieving an unusually thin and metallic sound. **Martin Jaggi** and the exhibition of instrumental technique in his *KÔRD 1* for solo viola (performed by **Petra Ackermann**) brought a welcome change from chamber playing.

Thanks to their excellent teamwork, we can only judge the performers of Ensemble Mondrian as a whole, not as individuals. In this concert too, they gave a remarkable performance which included a wide inventory of extended instrumental techniques, which included the fragile percussive sound of the partially prepared piano or so-called string piano, i.e. **Tamriko Kordzaii** plucking the strings directly. They proved their instrumental control most clearly when balancing on the very edges of the instrument sounding. Rather than harmony of any kind, it was pure sonic qualities at work.

The second half of the opening evening belonged to the **Isang Yun Trio**. The programme of this trio of leading Czech instrumentalists was framed by two pieces written by the Korean composer whose name the ensemble bears. In the opening couple of *OstWest Miniaturen I* and *II*, the coincidental planes of the “eastern” oboe (**Vilém Veverka**) and the “western” cello part (**Petr Nouzovský**) contributed to an effect of time freezing. The closing *Espace II*, then, relied on the other basic category at work in Isang Yun's oeuvre – musical *space*.

The oldest piece of the evening was **Witold Szalonek's** sonoric *Proporzioni 2* (1967–1970). Its importance within the festival has to do with the time of its composition. This performance reminded us that



Aleksander Wnuk

the traditional set of “avant-garde” techniques, which includes playing the harp with the tuning peg, applying masking tape to its strings, or sudden contrasting entries headed by the omnipresent pizzicato, has, over the course of fifty years, travelled a trajectory from innovation through mannerism to cliché. Let us find consolation in the fact that the remaining pieces in both concerts overwhelmingly managed just fine without them.

The first world premiere of this year's festival was *Forgetting Ravel* by **Ian Mikyska**, which explicitly turns towards the musical past. The aim of this musico-psychological experiment was for the listener to forget the music of Maurice Ravel in the course of a gradual decay of organised music, or rather, to stop hearing Ravel in the repeating quotations from his *Piano Trio* and *Sonata for Violin and Cello*, instead experiencing pure, direct sound. **Ondřej Štochl's** *Šerosvit* was based on the character of the painting technique known as *chiaroscuro*, and so he stayed on the very line between both principles – light and shadow, the revelation of meaning and mystery.

Oboist Vilém Veverka stood out with his distinctive playing with precise and fluid control of a strong tone, while harpist **Kateřina Englishová** displayed the expressive range of her instrument with a quiet certainty – including those few unusual techniques.

## Solo For Drum And...

The only solo programme of the festival was that of **Aleksander Wnuk**, a young Polish percussionist whose highly performative concert on the 14th of October brought to life the Na cucky Theatre in Olomouc. Sometimes humorous, at other times lightly provocative, he performed this thought-through program with almost unbelievable coordination, precision, and concentration – memorising and adequately executing the complex rhythmic-melodic passages demanded no less.

**Piotr Peszat's** *Jenny's Soul. Or Dirk's?* – with its risqué background – opened a series of pieces integrating many extra-musical possibilities including live projections, acting, and a number of props. **Pierluigi Billone's** meditative *Mani. Gonsha* made use of two Tibetan singing bowls, while the central piece of the programme, the world premiere *I'm at ocean level moisture with these hacks*, had not only metal springs stretched out over the edge of a drum, hairbrushes, and an electric cappuccino frother, but also composer **Cory Bracken's** speciality – several small vibrators wildly leaping around the frame of the drum, sounding the entire body of the instrument, amplified to the very border of noise. The last three pieces made do without electronics:

**François Sarhan's** rhythmic movement etude *Homework*,

the more traditional *Solo for Percussion* by **Michel van der Aa**, and an incredible feat in the demanding acting piece *Graffiti's* by **Georges Aperghis**, in which the already difficult part played on a number of percussion instruments is complicated by a fast German text.

## Three Trios

**Trio Helix**, comprised of **Tereza Horáková** (violin), **Ondřej Štochl** (viola), and **Lucie Tóth** (piano) gave the world premiere of **Marek Kopelent's** *Music from Silence for Violin, Viola, and Piano* on the 16th of October. I'd describe the piece as a "scenic ambience" of an abandoned industrial space, built more on sonic planes and lines than singing melodies graspable in the traditional sense. In contrast, **George Crumb's** music took on a historic function: his *Four Nocturnes (Night Music II)* for violin and prepared piano from 1964 brought that "new" sound of night music, as it was later made famous by Salvatore Sciarrino. **Pavel Zemek Novák's** *Touches of Mercy* (2017), then, was a safe bet, with its effective build-up of layers leading to an exceptionally insistent culmination of the dynamic and musical content.

A selection of Štochl's *Microludes for Violin and Piano* was certainly beneficial in clarifying his compositional principles and reducing his musical language to its very essence and was particularly striking in the complete artistic understanding between the composer and violinist Tereza Horáková, but I am uncertain if these embryonic compositions are suitable for concert performance. **Albert Breier's** delicate *Trio* with its long-breathed and almost Pärt-like fragile string lines was a pleasantly calming end to the programme. Sunday 21st of October belonged to the local ensemble **Lichtzwang**. The leading figure of the group and piano avant-garde specialist **Marek Kepřt** played solo – among others – the oldest piece of the festival: *Etude sur le carré magique sonore* by **Ivan Wyschnegradsky** from 1957. In the first half of the programme, he also displayed remarkable lightness in the charming and short *Esercizio* by **Salvatore Sciarrino** and **Gérard Pesson's** fragmented *No-Źa-Li*. **Jiří Fajkus** performed **Adrián Demoč's** early solo cello piece, *Katharsis*. The audience then had the opportunity to compare the development of this Slovak composer's creative methods over the course of fifteen years, when the two musicians mentioned above were joined by trumpet player **Jan Příbil** for the world premiere of Demoč's newest piece, *A Luca Marenzio*. The expressive melodicism of the cello was here replaced by an emphasis on the timbral component of a static succession of fragile chords in very low dynamics.





The gradual widening of the intervals in a long series of harmonies brought a hypnotic timeless effect.

Dream spaces evoking the first rays of the rising sun were also present in the evening's second premiere – Marek Keprt's piece, bearing a typically poetic (and, as usual, untranslatable) title: *jitřnoSmíšky...klamoMžítky...bzůňk!* It was an unmistakably "Keprtian" fragile musical space, with its careful cello glissandi, trumpet air tones, and a crystalline piano foundation, which gave the piece its sonic and structural framework. The second half of the evening was taken up by a recomposition of **Morton Feldman's** *Palais de Mari*, written and performed by Marek Keprt. The resulting piece of about half an hour, *palais de mari 2 (palais under snow)*, filled the dimmed Corpus Christi Chapel with the two composers' equal dialogue, in which both voices got to speak with surprising consonance – Feldman's lines in Keprt's sonic space.

On the 22nd of October, **Trio Catch** (**Bogłárka Pecze** on clarinet, **Eva Boesch** on cello, and **Sun-Young Nam** on piano) presented the highest level of virtuosity and interplay. They opened with a showcase of their skill, *Catch Sonata*, written for them by Gérard Pesson. Slight nuances of tone in short rhythmic models, layering of timbre in a carefully controlled dynamic, and an absolutely precise, unified rendition. The almost-solo violoncello, occasionally accompanied by the piano, was also brilliant in **Miroslav Srnka's** demanding (but clear) *Simple Space*. Korean composer **Heera Kim's** *PAR V* brought a remarkable sonic effect: carefully constructed – and excellently performed –, the piece explores almost philosophically the idea of some universal pre-instrument from which all individual instruments only descended later. The non-traditional sounding of the bodies of the instruments, without a single "musical" tone being heard, truly evoked some primordial sonic quality which precedes any instrument we might know. This piece managed to

present music which stands apart from what we understand as the melodic or rhythmic approaches.

The two final pieces were then more of a return to the established methods of contemporary composition: in the programme note to *As if*, **Johannes Boris Borowski** tries to alert his audience to (and probably justify his existence in relation to) the "possibilities of the system". But this music, of a standard contemporary form, did not radically overstep its own – considerably chaotic – system. **Georges Aperghis'** hectic, monumental, and, most of all, forceful *Trio* is almost a dictionary definition of "exalted". Nine images overflowing with drama were in sharp contrast to the light and humorous *Graffiti*s discussed above, performed a few days earlier by Aleksander Wnuk. Catch Trio then dealt with the notorious problem of encores with grace in the form of **Franco Donatoni's** thirty-second canapé, *Ella*.

#### **Very Good Exercise to End On**

The closing concert, on the 23rd of October, which featured the **BERG**



**Orchestra** and its conductor **Peter Vrábek**, was also billed as a ceremonial concert on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic.

The programme, composed of four pieces by contemporary Czech composers, was opened by a short melodrama by **Petr Wajsar**, *8 Movements for a Fan*, written for seven musicians and recitation and inspired by a collection of poems in French by Paul Claudel, reminiscent of Japanese haiku. The result was a gently knit continuous stream with fine dynamic and atmospheric differences between the individual components, and moments of tone painting including a remarkably effective imitation of a flute played on violin. Actor **Petr Kubes** recited Claudel's poems – which were also beamed onto the atrium walls – in French. Though he does not possess a command of his language (as he himself admits), he nevertheless managed the pitfalls of French pronunciation satisfactorily.

This February, **Matouš Hejl's** *Kaleidoscope* was awarded a new prize for contemporary music, Trochu nižší C4 (A Somewhat Lower C4). In this new, reworked version of his graduation piece, which originally followed the structure of Ray Bradbury's eponymous short story, the musical material is now newly recomposed and decomposed (as in a real kaleidoscope) to its individual components: tone, harmonic space, sound. **František Chaloupka**, whose music is performed regularly in Olomouc, did not premiere a new work this time, instead presenting an older piece: *Mašín Gum – Seven Rituals for purging the Czech Lands from the Spirit of Communism*, which presents in seven movements-rituals the infamous story of the Mašín brothers, who killed several people while attempting to escape Czechoslovakia in 1953. Chaloupka's characteristic musical language reveals itself immediately in the expressive entries of the strings and their compressed melodies. The dynamic peaks and awkward rhythmic transformations are difficult to perform together, and



are particularly testing for the two violins. The inclusion of a large number of woodwinds and a careful accent on their timbres is also a stable fixture with this ensemble. Despite the difficult conditions in rehearsing this seven-part piece, the BERG Orchestra performed it with the appropriate panache.

The evening was closed off by **Tomáš Reindl** and his stage melodrama, *Joga*. Petr Kubes took on the role of the Guru – i.e. the narrator – originally written for opera singer Soňa Červená, who premiered the piece last September. This homage to yoga begins with an exposition of correct breathing, body posture, and the beneficial health effects of practising, all this on a very “relaxing” musical background. The scenic component was realised by six women on yoga mats, who demonstrated the basic yogic positions of the *Surya Namaskār*, also known as the Sun Salutation. In addition to the orchestra, we also heard the traditional Indian tabla, a sampled tanpura, overtone singing, beatboxing, and more live electronics including a recording of a text by photographer František Drtíkol – all this in the hands of the composer. Well aware of his difficult task, i.e. standing in for Soňa Červená, Petr Kubes gave a felt, pathos-free performance – even in the most intense passage, which poses an almost humorous contrast with the foundation of yoga as a non-violent teaching: when the Guru barks out his commands as if he were in the army, while the music passes from fragment to fragment and the yogis barely have time to assume the positions demanded of them.

This anniversary edition of MusicOlomouc once again offered a diverse display of contemporary music in many forms, performed by excellent and carefully selected soloists and ensembles. After the seven substantial concerts, one might be tempted to quote – with a certain degree of hyperbole – the words of František Drtíkol, which were heard in a historical recording at the closing concert: “Very good exercise, I am dead.” Until next year at least.