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Czech Music With Nary a Polka to Be Found

By MICHAEL BECKERMAN

WHY is it that while Grieg is always identified as Norwegian and Borodin as Russian, commentators seldom refer to Mozart as Austrian? Two centuries ago, German-speaking composers dominated the world of instrumental music, and for their efforts, they lost their modifier. They and their Germanic successors got to write music with a capital M, but Bartók's works — even those not written in a self-consciously "national" style — were deemed Hungarian; Vaughan Williams's, English; and Copland's, American.

Yet that was long ago. Does nationality still matter to music in an age of globalization? What, for example, does it mean to be a Czech composer after the fall of Communism and the splintering of Czechoslovakia?

"People are free when they have a wider perspective," said Krystof Maratka, the composer in residence at the Caramoor International Music Festival in Katonah, N.Y., which is staging a minifestival, "Celebrating Two Centuries of Czech Music," from Thursday through Saturday. "When they are not frightened, they are rich inside and can be themselves."

Mr. Maratka (pronounced MAHR-zhaht-kah), 32, was speaking from his home in Paris, where he moved, he said, in part "to be a really Czech composer."

It has been more than 150 years since "national music" first became a rallying cry in Eastern Europe and 125 years since the Czech master Bedrich Smetana wrote his flowing description of Prague's great river, "The Moldau" (from "My Fatherland"), which is featured in the final program at Caramoor.

Whether or not his music is national in any meaningful way, Mr. Maratka is surely aware of national traditions.

"I come from an artistic family," he said. Indeed, shortly after the death of Dvorak (another composer featured in all three concerts), Mr. Maratka's grandfather, the sculptor Josef Maratka, molded Dvorak's death mask and produced exquisite models for a Dvorak memorial, which was never realized. In their passion and sense of civic pride, those models reflect the work of Josef Maratka's mentor Rodin, especially "The Burghers of Calais."

So Krystof Maratka came of age aware of an artistic and, especially, a Czech pedigree. Yet the "Czech style," as developed by Smetana and Dvorak,

relied on a combination of ancient tales and legends or ethno-touristic dances like polkas and furiant, elements wholly lacking in Mr. Maratka's music.

The first concert of the Caramoor series features music by Mr. Maratka, Smetana, Dvorak and Janacek, and the works of those earlier composers all refer to something outside themselves. The first movement of Dvorak's exquisite Terzetto, rarely played, is strangely labeled "Introduction." Introduction to what? The Labyrinth that follows only deepens the mystery. Quoting from one of Dvorak's Serbian Songs, "You Cannot Escape From Love," it suggests some important secret.

Smetana's Piano Trio in G minor heartbreakingly invokes Clara Schumann's trio, in the same key, as a memorial for his little daughter Bedriska, who he had hoped would, like Clara, be a musician revered in her own right. Janacek's First String Quartet ("Kreutzer Sonata"), based on a story by Tolstoy inspired by a violin sonata by Beethoven, is, according to Janacek, at least in part a portrait of the "pitiable woman" murdered in the story.

Does Mr. Maratka's piano quartet "Exaltum," in the same program, also refer to something outside the music? At first it appears not.

"Exaltum" is a piece about energy," Mr. Maratka said. "It becomes more and more exalted, much more agitated. The piece gradually goes out of control and concludes with a crazy gyrating."

But then he referred to Andrei Tarkovsky's psychological sci-fi parable "Stalker," from 1979. "In the

middle of the film," Mr. Maratka said, "there is a quote from Lao Tzu: 'What is tender is sublime, and what is strong and rigid is close to death.' This kind of thinking is part of 'Exaltum.'"

So this piece would seem to offer a representative slice of Czech music, which is full of works referring to personal secrets and to Slavic and German worlds, both conforming to and seeking to evade traditional notions of "absolute," or pure, music. Mr. Maratka is elusive on this subject and also about having his works presented in an all-Czech context.

"For the French," he said, "I am a Czech composer. But I do not really cultivate such an identity. Many people listening to my music tell me that there is something Czech about it. Certainly, my language is Czech, and my greatest master is Janacek. To have a premiere of my first orchestral piece in such a context is fantastic."

That piece, to be presented on Saturday, is "Otisk" ("Imprint"), subtitled "A Paleolithic Stratum of Pre-Instrumental Music." Mr. Maratka has long been fascinated by the beginnings of art and what sounds human beings might have produced before music.

"I studied this subject and read many books about prehistoric cave art," Mr. Maratka said, "and I find it a site of what I call true life. I am inspired by things made by human beings and the ways in which they touch our lives."

He understood that he was entering here on an area of fiction. "We have bone instruments and musical

stones," he said, "but we don't know how these instruments were used. The most interesting instrument was the human voice, and we do not know what it sounded like, so I offer my own vision of it. To create the form of 'Otisk,' I imagined a vast archaeological site where you may find many extracts of historical music. The instruments play, but they are not conducted, because time does not yet exist."

He wryly connects this conceit to Dvorak's famous war horse: "I call it the Symphony 'From the Old World.'"

How should an audience approach such a work? "Well, I believe that contrast gives form to life," Mr. Maratka said. "Day and night, the seasons, are always formed by contrast. In my music you can find contrasts, and that allows listeners to follow and make sense of it."

Mr. Maratka is ambivalent about his audience. "For me the audience is very important," he said. "I live with a family of musicians, and it is necessary for me to see the music in the eyes of the listener in order to form an opinion, and I also like to talk about music with an audience. On the other hand, I don't think that I would change my style or make it easier to make it accessible to the audience."

Peter Oundjian, the music director of the Caramoor Festival, who will conduct the premiere of "Otisk," says, "The score has a certain conviction, flavor and flair, and though it doesn't have Slavic character, it carries some of the feeling of a Janacek work."

But after all of that, is "Otisk" a Czech piece, or does it only seem so when placed alongside such outside masterpieces as Smetana's "Moldau" and Dvorak's Cello Concerto?

"I don't think I have a French way of musical thinking, which is based more on timbre, color and the mixing of colors," Mr. Maratka said. "My music aims to be directly expressive, and this is achieved in part by strong rhythms."

He seems to have in mind the same kind of power described by critics anticipating the arrival of Dvorak in the New World more than a century ago: that barbaric Slavic yawp tracing the equation between rhythmic pulse and emotional truth.

Such issues are difficult to avoid in this context but tricky to resolve. Mr. Maratka worries that even asking these questions may limit the response to his music. "I don't want to be the hands of the audience," he said, "because the music should speak for itself."

In voicing such concerns, he shares a legacy with those figures, from Smetana on, who displayed their Czech identity with ambivalence and even frustration but also with pleasure and pride.

Krystof Maratka: what does it mean to be a Czech composer in an era of globalization?



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