Vítězslav Novák in the Context of Czech Music as a Whole: Thoughts about the Composer’s Fate

I present this paper as a reflection on the reception of Novák’s oeuvre, a composer who played a prominent role in 20th century Czech music and whose music is not heard in concert halls these days. Vítězslav Novák is the type of composer whose development is marked by a dynamic change in aesthetic norms. In his oeuvre there are canonical (classic) works and works that do not contribute to his process of development and overlooked and forgotten works worthy of our attention. Such distinctions are obviously undergoing vast changes.

Discussion is devoted to the role of Vítězslav Novák in the frame of Czech music around 1900. Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949) is one of the composers where the characteristic contrasts can be found in many respects that can be described with functions central-marginal, global-local, heterogeneous-homogeneous. But indicated categories are no naturally given constants. They also do not represent categories that had been prescribed by Novák himself but that spring from the discourse on Novák at least in Czech environment.


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Abstract

I present this paper as a reflection on the reception of Novák’s oeuvre, a composer who played a prominent role in 20th century Czech music and whose music is not heard in concert halls these days. Vítězslav Novák is the type of composer whose development is marked by a dynamic change in aesthetic norms. In his oeuvre there are canonical (classic) works and works that do not contribute to his process of development and overlooked and forgotten works worthy of our attention. Such distinctions are obviously undergoing vast changes.
A side note by way of introduction: when Jiří Fukač pondering in an article the reception and further possibilities for Novák’s music, he chose an apt title: “Novák’s Time Will Still Come.”¹ Fukač’s title was allegedly inspired by a quote from Kurt Blaukopf, who said it on 5 September 1989 during a coffee break at a Mahler conference in Hamburg. Lest this prognosticating proclamation be forgotten forever, I’d like to use it as the main thesis of my paper.

I owe a foreign audience an answer to an important question: Who is the composer whose “time will come?” Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949) composed 79 opuses, which cover a wide range of genres from opera to large orchestral and vocal compositions to small chamber works. Together with Josef Suk and Otakar Ostrčil, Vítězslav Novák belongs to a generation of composers that was later termed Czech musical modernism. These composers had the difficult task of extending the tradition of Czech nationalist music of Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák while at the same time seeking their own path. Novák took up this task beautifully and after 1896 Novák’s music was the greatest phenomenon on the Czech music scene.

Novák studied composition under Antonín Dvořák. With Dvořák came the first institutionalized Czech school of composition and he became the most renowned Czech composition teacher second only to Dvořák. Novák trained numerous Czech composers in addition to a whole generation of Slovak composers. Even many of Janáček’s students left Brno for Prague in order to perfect their compositional craft. Further, Novák trained a handful of German and Yugoslav composers. In 1912, he applied for a professorship at the Viennese Academy. Later he received numerous honors and awards both at home and abroad (France, Yugoslavia, Italy, Sweden). Premieres for his works were notable social occasions and each of his life anniversaries are publically celebrated. But even though Novák belonged to the renowned giants of Czech music, he was no longer able to overcome a creative crisis, which had begun in 1918. It was apparent for instance at the Prague festivals of new music (ISCM), where he remained in the shadows of other composers (Suk, Janáček, Martinů, Hába).

As a representative figure of the late nineteenth century, he did not share the strong optimism of the 20th-century avant garde composers. Novák shared a fate with a whole generation of composers who were uncertain how to proceed as the avant garde was beginning. Novák was too old to learn a new expressive language and too young to cease composing. A similar fate met Sibelius and Busoni, among others. At the beginning of the 20th century, Novák imitated canonical works of the late 19th century, so after World War I he was criticized by avantgardists for his traditionalism (some even found fault with his technical prowess). The prime metric by which artworks were judged was innovation worthy of the Zeitgeist of the early twentieth century.

Nevertheless, Novák was later considered a composer of primary significance. In 1970, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Novák’s birth, Czech musicologist Jaroslav Volek called him in an article a “pivotal figure of Czech music.”² In comparison

to other composers and considering Novák’s pedagogical activity, these words are
certainly true.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the polemical tone of Volek’s article. What is
the truth about Novák? Will Novák’s time actually come? Kurt Blaukopf was not announc-
ing an historical thesis, but rather an aesthetic judgment, which has clear biographical
connotations. Blaukopf played Novák’s string quartets in his youth and this fact forever
determined his opinion of the composer. Blaukopf of course overlooked the substantial
difference in the reception of Mahler and Novák. In the 1960s, when Mahler’s music
was finding its way into concert halls around the world, interest in Novák’s music began
to decline.

Right now I don’t want to reflect on the many causes for the lack of interest. The
fact is that his compositions remain on the periphery of Czech musical art. Time and
historical remove is one of several factors in the judgment of classical works that plays
in Mahler’s favor. His music seems “timeless,” to use the misleading category aesthetic
platonism. By coincidence Blaukopf made his statement at a conference dedicated to
Mahler’s oeuvre, so a comparison of the two composers suggest itself.

Vítězslav Novák tried to summarize his relationship to Mahler’s music in his mem-
oirs:

“To use Dvořák’s words, I like Mahler, but I cannot stand him. What do I like about the
music? His sincerity. Whichever mood he expresses, everything is intensely felt. Mahlers
second positive trait is his talent for melody. His expositions never rest on choppy motives.
Some of his themes I would call songs without words. [...] One more thing I like about
him: Mahler as a person. As director of the Hamburg and later Viennese opera houses,
he didn’t composer a single opera, even though he had the compositional talent and
promotional possibilities. He made up for it with several of his symphonies, even those
non-programmatic. [...] What do I dislike about him? The lack of self-criticism. He rarely
ends at the right time. Whether he is mourning or exulting, he knows no limits. The result
of this excess is the listener’s fatigue. In addition to their length, these works increase the
fatigue with their insufficient rhythmic interest and modulation. Mahler often persists in
the same rhythm and sometimes even tempo for the whole movement, in stark contrast
to Richard Strauss. [...] With a fleeting glance at Mahler’s score we find whole sections
in one key without deviation. The key signatures make things easier for us.”

Words intended for Mahler, as if they boomeranged back to their speaker. They ap-
pear to reveal weaknesses in Novák’s own music. Novák also liked to cite other works,
and anyway, the use of stylistically foreign “precomposed” material is typical for music
around 1900. With Mahler began a system of units—Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht called it
Vokabeln—which make a musical work polystratified. Novák worked similarly as Mahler
did, and yet at the same time differently. The source of the heterogenization of structure
are quotes of various provenance and notational level—folk song, melodic thoughts of
choral character, citations from his own works. Novák does not use quotes in a superficial
manner—they go deep into the structure. From a technical point of view, this is done
by means of thorough motivic-thematic development and counterpoint. Novák weaves

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his new thoughts into a complicated tapestry of voices—the intellectual character of his music comes from this. Novák’s oeuvre this way takes on a clear biographical cast. In relation to the “tonal environment” in the structure, these elements are foreign objects. Their borrowing does not have anything in common with quotes like those found in Mahler’s music, where the mutual connection of low and high evoke a feeling of modern existential alienation.

In this sense, Novák’s relationship to folk music is clear. A connection to folksong is something that makes him similar to (and distinguishes him from) Janáček. Around 1900, Janáček was the prototype of a “homegrown” composer who attempted to create a Moravian variant of Czech national music. Janáček stopped composing in the 1890s and devoted himself to the collection and study of folk music, which meant for him protection from the influences of Neoromanticism. At this time, however, Novák developed a new canon of European modern music. If Janáček’s (like Hába’s) relationship to folk culture was experienced, it was led so to speak from below (von unten), while Novák’s relationship to folk culture was mediated (von oben). Or in other words, Novák does not flee the center for the periphery in order to avoid the stream of late Romantic music, but rather to give tradition new strength. Novák came to Moravia from the salon, and this statement is true both figuratively and literally. Like Dvořák before him, Novák wanted to enrich Czech music with new “exotic” idioms. For a composer who came from one of the important centers of a monarchy, this was at the end of the 19th century and at the threshold of fin-de-siècle modernist art a quite expected “attempt.” Novák, who used authentic folk melodies in a method similar to that of Beethoven’s or Brahms’s thematic work, was long acknowledged as a discoverer of a meaningful stylistic direction for Czech modern music. Janáček chose another way. He simplified and freed musical structure; his music did not strictly maintain contrapuntal lines and voice independence. He avoided direct citation of folk songs and took inspiration there only in the most general manner into the areas of tonality, modality, and rhythm.

Folk inspiration of Novák and Janáček found many critics. Among the most strident was Zdeněk Nejedlý, whose aesthetic judgments were determinative for Czech music in the first third of the twentieth century. Nejedlý’s negative opinion of “folk music” had several causes. One was his perception of such music as a return to an older aesthetic; another could be described as an ethical problem.

Novák’s and Janáček’s musical styles were at first hearing distinguishable from each other, and Nejedlý also saw their folk inspiration and development in different ways. With Janáček he found a regressive style coming from the periphery. In Janáček’s opera Jenůfa (Její pastorkyňa, 1903), he saw a clear similarity to an older Romantic aesthetic of the 1860s, where the character of the work was consciously determined by the quoting of folk songs and reaching out to a wider folk public. (I would like to note here that Janáček does not quote, but in certain places in the opera he places melodies that paraphrase melodic types of Moravian folk music.) From this point of view, “pre-Smetana” Janáček seemed typologically regressive. 5 This judgment also reflects the public’s reaction. For

Moravian patriots, *Jenůfa* was the model for Moravian opera and was perceived this way during its performance in Viennese Hofoper (Hofoper, 1918).

On the other hand, criticism of Novák's interest in “falsified citations” of folk song and in too naturalistic descriptiveness sounds much more muted. For Nejedlý, Novák's music is on a developmentally higher level in its involvement with folk music. If aesthetic and stylistic qualities of such music differ from work to work, this “unusual compositional style” certainly enriched Novák's music with new material qualities.⁶ Nejedlý's critical view of both composers' use of folk music has two clear causes. Here Nejedlý develops T.G. Masaryk's notion of the function of folk culture in a national context. At the very least at the beginning of the 1920s Nejedlý distinguishes between folk culture and its use between the art of a particular composer and the tastes of the wider public. The concertgoing public is in its essence conservative. A truly progressive composer is not supposed to cater to the whims of this public. Despite the suffering that the composer endures, he is able to resist public pressure and to develop his musical individuality.

It would of course be interesting to compare Nejedlý’s rhetoric with Adorno's critique “Blut und boden Musik,” as it appears in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949). According to Adorno, late Romantic music lost its national character, for which it paid a necessary price. Overcoming alienation, the music entered the realm of nationalist reactionary ideology. Progressive tendencies of occidental music appeared without the “shameful stain” only in the exterritorial music of Janáček and Bartók.⁷ If Janáček survived Adorno's critique, Novák certainly failed. Adorno would likely pronounce Novák's music as nationally reactionary—affirmative and holding to tradition.

As if Czech music could not do anything other than cultivate some sort of local historical hypothesis of a composer whose time has long ago past. Although I like the aforementioned quote from Adorno's work, I am not completely certain of the correctness of such a characterization. Novák's style did not allow full use of archetypes of folk music, as is the case with, for example, Janáček.

His music also does not approach Bartok's authentic rawness. The aforementioned composers of course cannot be the measure of the greatness of Novák's music; that would be at a minimum historically incorrect, because Novák worked in a different way with folk music.

What is today's role of a composer in the context of Czech music? Novák distinguished himself only marginally among the standard-setting classics of Czech or central European music of the early twentieth century (in some cases this evaluation can sound optimistic). In artworks there is a differentiation between canonical and overlooked works. A work does not enter the canon on the basis of its timeless qualities alone. Classicization or canonization is an historical process in which on the basis of a tendentious reshuffle of values a group of works and composers is chosen, a group which represents the prevailing and enduring stylistic norm. Novák's position in the register of “important works” has gone through notable changes over time. The result was not always that Novák's works were seen as timeless or himself as a prevailing composer. Even though reception of Novák's works was never without controversy, we can hope that no aesthetic norm

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is forever. Can Novák’s time still come? Possibly. At least Blaukopf’s memory from his youth—a private history of a type—can give us that hope.

POVZETEK
