

David Gaines: Czech musicians are extremely talented

Kroměříž - He traveled halfway across the globe in order to attend the premiere of his symphonic composition written specifically for the trombone world's top player, Robert Kozánek. Together with the P. J. Vejvanovský Conservatory, Robert presented the composition at the Kroměříž Castle. This 48-year-old American lives in Rockville, Maryland near Washington, D.C. He studied at Northwestern University, American University and Johns Hopkins University's Peabody Conservatory of Music. He holds prestigious awards from ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers). The international organization Muzika Esperanto-Ligo awarded him the title of Honorary President recognizing his use of Esperanto in creating music. For a long time off-record we went through topics such as animals, vegetarianism, smoking, plum brandy (slivovice), and also religion, relationships and rock music. A doctor in the field of composition - David Gaines.

Is it difficult to win recognition in the USA with contemporary classical music?

I've had some success and I'm grateful for that. I've spent years trying to get my music known to a wider audience. In the USA there is quite a lot of competition in this area. Composers have to compete for good players; one has to gain interest from conductors, recording companies.....we have to get radio stations and audiences interested. I've been lucky because some good players have noticed my music. They liked my work and that has helped me to present my music to a wider audience. In short, winning recognition with classical music in the USA is about luck, too.

It seems to me that contemporary classical music is accepted rather reluctantly in the Czech Republic. How about in the USA?

Here is the same situation. Over the last few decades there has been a gradual decrease in music education in elementary and secondary schools, with a result that American public, which was never musically well educated, has the lowest level of knowledge and understanding of serious music in its history. Americans are obsessed with pop culture, and if we talk about contemporary music, which is not a part of mass pop culture, we talk about small group of people who might be interested.

Modern composer has to get people interested somehow. Who do you like and how do you do it yourself?

There are very imaginative conductors like Marin Alsop in Baltimore, Michael Tilson Thomas in San Francisco or the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, but generally it's difficult for composers like me to get potential listeners interested. That's why I deliberately use instrumental combinations and composition style so they would appeal to listeners as well as players. This is my successful strategy. And this was my thinking while composing new trombone concerto.

What do you mean by “composing strategy?”

I mean that while composing, I pay attention to all recipients of my music: players, conductors, audience or listeners of recordings. That’s common among composers who are grounded in reality.

I will ask differently. Has composing changed since 19th century?

I think people see composers as aloof, magical artists whose only purpose is to express their inner longings and desires, regardless of what listeners and critics think. This is very Romantic and 19th century. I think that today, at least in USA, composers tend to be more connected with culture at large. And they care about how their music will be received.

Do you mean that composers consider the commercial point of view more?

Yes, but I don’t mean that we are obsessed with commercial considerations or popularity at all costs. I’m just saying that there is more to think about while composing serious music than just personal motivation alone. I realize that many other composers will disagree, and that’s OK, I’m just explaining my own way of doing things.

Your music reminds me of old black and white movies. Have you ever thought about visualizing your work?

Yes, I thought about trying it. I would like to compose film music too. Here I am movie makers, contact me, I’m interested! (Laugh) But I tried something like that before. During the premiere of my second symphony, *The Lion of Panjshir* in 2004, I used photos of Ahmed Shah Massoud. Photos were projected behind the stage, and they went very well together with the music. I would like to do this again in the future.

Ahmed Shah Massoud was important leader of resistance against Soviet army occupying Afghanistan. That appeals to us. Then he was one of the most significant fighters against Taliban during Afghan civil war. Where did the idea to write a symphony about him come from?

Once in 2001, I was watching National Geographic channel at home. And there was a report about Afghani civil war by a journalist Sebastian Junger. And Massoud appeared on the screen. I had never heard of this man, and he made a great impression on me, his story was fascinating. The determination to protect Afghanistan against Taliban rule was heroic and inspiring. Because I didn’t find any evidence that someone had already created music in tribute to him, I decided to do so myself.

It had to be difficult to gather all the information. Just a reminder: Massoud was killed by the Taliban, two days before the attack on the United States, on September 9th 2001.

I follow world news more than average American. Therefore I’m more familiar with it. But that wouldn’t be enough. The then-Afghan ambassador to the USA Haron Amin and Sebastian Junger were very helpful. Important were their personal knowledge of Massoud and their excellent knowledge of Afghan culture. These things were as inspiring as Massoud himself.

You use Esperanto in your work. Is that also a strategy how to make people interested?

Of course, I'm advocate for Esperanto, that's no secret. But the language is amazing musical tool as well. If it was not I wouldn't use it.

Tell us more please.

Esperanto is very expressive and pleasant-sounding language. It is good for singing. I recommend it to composers who want to try something new, something underutilized. Plenty of people don't know about the language and others are biased against this beautiful language for some reason. There is no room for bias in music. Composer should be unbiased to all means of expression and Esperanto is just another creative approach. There are songs in Icelandic, Lithuanian or Swahili, why not Esperanto?

Do you think that this “artificial” language has a chance to succeed next to languages like English, Spanish, and Chinese?

What does “succeed” mean? On a small scale it has been eminently successful, beyond many people's dreams, especially since the invention of World Wide Web. Nongovernment organizations and European parliamentarians are interested in it as a universal translation tool and as good start for learning languages generally. Today, very few people still believe that this language will achieve world dominance, but Esperanto exists for different reasons then, for example, English. Neutrality plays its role here. That is useful and attractive for a part of the population.

Do you use Esperanto commonly abroad?

For example, besides English, I can speak Spanish and Portuguese. Though, even when I'm in Brazil or I speak with Spanish speaker, I rather use Esperanto if possible. It's more expressive for me and it puts us all on the same linguistic footing. It is the same in Czech. Relying on the fact that everybody speaks English would be quite arrogant of me. I would rather stumble in the little Czech I know and use Esperanto. It is actually worse for me in Czech Republic being vegetarian then being Esperantist.

When I used term “artificial language” you disagreed, why?

Calling Esperanto an artificial language is incorrect. There are artificial languages, yes, but those were created completely from scratch. Artificial languages don't use pre-existing words. Esperanto is different. It's a hybrid. It is combination of vocabulary, grammar and syntax borrowed from pre-existing ethnic languages. We rather call it planned or auxiliary language, created by Dr. Zamenhof.

When was your first contact with Czech Republic?

It was in October 2000. At that time my recording label MMC Recordings decided that my first symphony would be recorded by Moravian Philharmonic in Olomouc led by Vit Micka. Then, last year I visited Prague on my way to Bratislava, where my concerto for baritone saxophone was recorded. Third visit is in September, in Kroměříž where I'm presenting my new Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra as world premiere.

You recorded your euphonium concerto with P. J. Vejvanovsky conservatory graduate Jiří Vydra. Now you will present the world premiere of your work with another Kroměříž graduate, Robert Kozánek.

Jiří Vydra was fantastic. I love his playing. Czech musicians are all friendly and extremely talented. It is nice to work with them. That's why it makes me happy that Robert Kozánek, as another Kroměříž Conservatory graduate, can play my music in front of Czech audience.

Tell us something about your new trombone concerto please.

It is a concerto written specifically for Robert Kozánek as a soloist to be accompanied by student orchestra. It consists of four movements. Three of those are there to show Robert's virtuoso trombone playing technique, and one is written for Robert's euphonium playing. As far as style is concerned, there are harmonies and scales that I borrowed from all around the world, and tried to combine them with American orchestral music, as well as a brief quotation from Janaček's *Three Moravian Dances*.

Any notes for the audience when listening to the Janaček quotation in your piece?

It is in the last movement. The instrumentation is unusual - a "metallic orchestra" based on Armenian-American composer Alan Hovhaness' *Symphony No. 17 for metal orchestra* and consisting only of flutes, trombones, metal percussion, and strings, in addition to the solo trombone. I tried to make this a unique and distinctive composition in many ways.

Antonin Kuznik