

## Suita Rustica, op. 19 (1938)

Following the success of her *Vojenská symfonieta* at the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) Festival in London in June 1938, Kaprálová was asked by Universal Edition's London office to write another symphonic work – a suite whose themes would be derived from folk songs and dances of the Czech lands.<sup>1</sup> When the composer received an inquiry from the publisher in October on its progress,<sup>2</sup> she promptly interrupted her work on other projects in order to meet the publisher's deadline, which required that the suite be completed by November 15.<sup>3</sup> Her pace was remarkable: the sketches for her *Suita rustica* (subtitled Suite from Czech folk songs and dances) were finished on November 2 and the orchestration finalized on November 10. Kaprálová dedicated the work to musicologist Otakar Šourek in gratitude for his invaluable assistance in gaining approval for the renewal of her French scholarship.<sup>4</sup> In the end, Universal Edition did not publish the suite, a rather baffling decision given the work's many appealing moments of exquisite lyricism and innocent exuberance. Generated from folk borrowings, these moments are set against a background of modernist devices reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*.

The degree of influence from Stravinsky's ballet on the three-movement *Suita rustica* can be easily surmised from the music itself. The young composer's relationship with the ballet was long-standing. She was fascinated by *Petrushka* when she was a student in Brno, studied the work extensively in Prague, and was drawn to it again when she moved to Paris,<sup>5</sup> where the ballet was premiered by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in 1911 with Vaslav Nijinsky in the title role.

Kaprálová began *Suita rustica* with a strategy of initial tension relieved by lyrical episodes, similar to the method employed by Stravinsky in his Shrovetide Fair music that occurs before the magician's entrance in *Petrushka*'s first tableau. Both *Suita rustica* and *Petrushka* utilize folk tradition as the stable and comparatively consonant element against a strikingly dissonant and rhythmically insistent background. Other organizational features in common with the first tableau of Stravinsky's work that also define the mood of *Suita rustica* are immediately apparent. In the opening measures of the suite, Kaprálová summoned the full orchestra, colored in Rimsky-Korsakov's manner with a heavy dose of brass and percussion, to suggest an exotic and powerful, yet somewhat imprecise landscape, much as Stravinsky had created with similar scene-connecting episodes in the opening of the ballet. Once the unifying foundation of the movement was established, Kaprálová introduced the listener to various scenes from peasant life via the use of folk songs (Stravinsky, in a similar fashion, focused attention on the sideshows and other attractions at the fair). Kaprálová borrowed two folk melodies for this movement: the first is from Moravia—"Preletěl slavýček pres Javornýček" (The nightingale flew over Javorník); the second belongs to the spirited village folk residing further east in Slovakia—"Čiaže je to rolička nezoraná?" (Whose is it, this unploughed little field?).

The second movement bears more resemblance to Dvořák and Smetana than to Stravinsky. Two points of comparison seem appropriate—the first, to the opening of the second movement "Largo" from Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 ("From the New World") and the second, to the emblematic Bohemian furiant. This dance was appropriated on several occasions by Czech composers; the version Kaprálová selected gained worldwide recognition when Smetana utilized it in the second act of *Prodaná nevěsta* (The Bartered Bride). Kaprálová created a frame around the central part of the movement—much like Dvořák had done in the opening of the "Largo"—

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<sup>1</sup> Jiří Macek, *Vítězslava Kaprálová* (Prague: Knižnice Hudebních rozhledů, 1958), 164.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Kalmus to Vítězslava Kaprálová, 11 October 1938. Private archive.

<sup>3</sup> Vítězslava Kaprálová to Otakar Šourek, 26 October 1938. Private archive.

<sup>4</sup> Vítězslava Kaprálová to Otakar Šourek, 24 November 1938. Private archive.

<sup>5</sup> Macek, 167.

utilizing the Silesian folk song “Měla jsem holúbka v truhle schovaného” (I had a little pigeon hidden in my wooden trunk) as its basis. Inside this frame is the furiant with development, based on the version of the dance “Sedlák, sedlák” (Farmer, farmer) from the area of Klatovy, a town south of Plzeň in western Bohemia. With a rapid two-stage modulation to C Major (the key of Dvořák’s *Slavonic Dance*, op. 46, no. 1, also a furiant), we are now in Klatovy to enjoy the happiness of the villagers in a rendition of this invigorating Bohemian dance. Characterized by the slightly off-balance effect created by shifting duple and triple groupings within a 3/4 or 6/8 meter, in fact a hemiola, the furiant is a favorite to express the exuberance and rhythmic vitality of much of the music of the Czech lands.

The third movement is prefaced at the end of the second with the upper neighbor figure altered to begin and end on an augmented fourth in the oboes. This dissonant interval effectively attracts our attention for a return to the Stravinskian model in the last movement. The inner segment of Czechness (the second movement) becomes confined, therefore, within the larger frame of Slavic influence (movements one and three). Kaprálová called once again on the incessant rhythms of Stravinsky’s so-called primitive style heard in *Le sacre du printemps*. Combined with the mood of the third movement opening, however, the allegiance is, as before, more with *Petrushka*. Kaprálová’s jaunty first theme, a setting of the Bohemian tune “Ešče mě nemáš, hopaj, šupaj” (You don’t have me yet), is announced by the trumpets and trombones in consonant intervals of thirds, fourths, and fifths. The contrasting theme is set to the tune of the Slovak folksong “Vysoko zornička, dobrú noc Anička” (Good night Annie, the evening star is high in the sky). After a brief developmental section, a voice from the past emerges. It is an unlikely place for a four-voice fugue, but Kaprálová inserted one anyway. As the third movement approaches its end, Kaprálová faced the problem of how to move from a neo-baroque style and little more than a classical-sized ensemble, short on brass and percussion, to conclude with a Stravinsky-esque full Romantic orchestra, obsessed with rhythm and shifting accents, the place from which we embarked on our journey through a myriad of styles and geographical regions. With snatches of melody in the distinctive sixteenth-eighth-note pattern from the beginning of the final movement, Kaprálová attempted to work her way to a convincing close. In the spirit of the mood established thus far, the work comes to a full and dissonant stop, with only the snare drum left sounding. The conductor determines the length of the dramatic fermata before making a final run to the finish, beginning in the lower strings, momentarily delayed by a short fanfare from a solo trumpet, then proceeding to a rousing, if sudden, finish.

The performance history of *Suita rustica* was centered in Brno in the 1940s. The work received its premiere on April 16, 1939 with Břetislav Bakala conducting the Radio Brno Orchestra. This attractive composition also served as the musical portion for a “grotesque ballet with a prologue” presented at the National Theater in Brno on October 23, 1945, with text by Ivan Blatný. In 1975, the first recording of *Suita rustica*, performed by the Brno Philharmonic under the direction of Jiří Pinkas, was released by Supraphon; its second recording, performed by the Brno Philharmonic under the direction of Olga Pavlů, was released by the Czech Radio label Radioservis in 2016. Renewed interest in Kaprálová’s music in this millennium has also led to an increased number of recent performances and broadcasts of *Suita rustica* within and outside the Czech Republic, particularly in the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See performance history at [kapralova.org](http://kapralova.org).