

# The Kapralova Society Journal

*A Journal of Women in Music*

*Sad Evening, Great Discovery: Bringing to Light a New Song by Vítězslava Kaprálová*  
*Timothy Cheek*



*Special points of interest:*

- Kaprálová's *Sad Evening*
- Conductor Laurence Equilbey

*Inside this issue:*

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I will never forget the time I first came across the music of Vítězslava Kaprálová. While researching Czech vocal repertoire for my book *Singing in Czech* in 1999, I received permission to play through stacks of music at an upright piano in the store Opus Musicum, which used to be on Chopinova Street in Prague. I was delighted to find many gems by Petrželka, Novák (two of Kaprálová's teachers, it turned out), Suk, and many others, but when I came across the song "Navždy" by Kaprálová I was stunned. The atmosphere of the opening . . . the unusual harmonic vocabulary . . . the passion of the middle section—the music was so exquisite and the personality of the composer so strong that I had to discover more about her. Soon after, I found my way to the Kapralova Society and discovered that its founder, Karla Hartl, had laid the groundwork for me just a year before, and so I was on my way to embracing the many achievements of this largely forgotten composer. For Kaprálová's songs, some milestones to follow, after much research and well-received performances (some of them world premieres), were the recording with Supraphon of most of the songs with soprano Dana Burešová and myself in 2003, the beautiful edition of the songs with Amos Editio in 2005, a proliferation of dissertations and articles on the songs as others responded to this phenomenal composer, and—more and more performances of this exquisite music by

students and professionals, worldwide. In 2009, another beautiful recording of the *Navždy* cycle appeared on the Centaur label in the album *Women of Firsts* with tenor Daniel Weeks and pianist Naomi Oliphant.<sup>1</sup>

With this article, we celebrate another milestone, the publishing of a previously unknown song by Kaprálová, *Smutný večer/Sad Evening* with Amos Editio in 2011, and the world-premiere recording of the song by soprano Héléne Lindqvist and Philipp Vogler in 2013, at *theart-songproject.com*. This song was able to materialize from virtual obscurity thanks to the team effort of Kapralova Society's founder and head Karla Hartl, Amos Editio chief music editor Věroslav Němec, myself, and my undergraduate assistant at the University of Michigan, Nicholas Skorina.

I received an exciting email from Karla Hartl in 2006, in which she asked me to look at what appeared to be a previously unknown orchestral song by Kaprálová in the Moravian Museum archives in Brno. Until Karla Hartl discovered it in April of 2006, this song had somehow been overlooked, not only by us, but also by Kaprálová's Czech biographers and other sources, as it is mentioned nowhere. Karla Hartl's persistent research led her to a list of works that was attached to a curriculum vitae prepared by Kaprálová at the request of Alois Hába for the 1938 ISCM Festival brochure. (Kaprálová conducted her *Mili-*

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tary *Sinfonietta* with the BBC Orchestra at the ISCM Festival in London in 1938.) The list was sent to Hába in Kaprálová's letter dated February 3, 1938. The list does not specifically mention the song *Smutný večer*, but it does mention a collection of unnamed orchestral songs. It is possible that the collection was a project that Kaprálová later abandoned, since it is never mentioned again in any of her correspondence and lists of works that followed.<sup>2</sup> That proposed orchestral song collection would most certainly have included Kaprálová's 1938 orchestral version of *Sbohem a šáteček/Waving Farewell*, and most likely *Smutný večer* and the version of *Navždy/Forever* for orchestra and voice-band (chorus of reciters—in Kaprálová's work two sections of reciters.<sup>3</sup> This *Navždy* was unfinished and, except for Čarek's poetry, is completely different from the 1937 version of "Navždy" for voice and piano).<sup>4</sup>

There are no dates on the manuscripts of *Smutný večer*, but somewhere around 1936 seems about right.<sup>5</sup> The orchestral writing is masterful, and the quasi-impressionistic writing brings with it subtle echoes of Kaprálová's wonderfully decadent song *Leden* for small chamber ensemble from 1933; of the passionate, romantic outbursts of the early "Jitro" from 1932; but also of the intricate writing of later songs from the cycle *Jablko s klína*, from 1934–36, the *Navždy* songs from 1936–37, and *Sbohem a šáteček* from 1937.

Much time was spent in searching for the author of the song's poetry, as Kaprálová did not indicate a poet for the text. University of Michigan Professor of Czech Language and Literature Zdeňka Brodská, a native of Brno, found the poem to be reminiscent of the poetry of Karel Hlaváček (1874–98) or Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951), two leading proponents of a late nineteenth-century "decadent" style of Czech poetry. These and countless other sources came to naught, however. At first it was thought that the poem was too masterful to have been written by Kaprálová herself, but in the end, this possibility seems feasible.<sup>6</sup>

The poem and my translation follow:

***Smutný večer***

*Studený večer hle v tichu zní dávný pláč.  
Vzpomínka bloudí po čele jak tajuplný zaklínač.  
Je večer hořkých slz,  
bez slunce v čase těžce zkvetl  
mé slzy studená oblaka prší  
mé slzy na přání jež nikdo nepronese.*

*V šeru vždy klíčí semena touhy, touhy,  
však květů nezná,  
květů nezná tichý samotář.  
Z krystalu ticha  
přede spánek úzkostí lehce bledý.*

***Sad Evening***

*Cold evening,  
there in the silence is the sound of weeping from long ago.  
Memory wanders across my forehead  
like an otherworldly conjurer.  
It is an evening of bitter tears,  
without the sun it blossomed in time uneasily,  
cold gray clouds are raining my tears,  
my tears on wishes which no one proclaimed.  
In twilight, there always sprout seeds of desire, of desire;  
however, he doesn't know about blossoms,  
doesn't know about blossoms, he, the quiet recluse.  
From the crystal of silence spins a sleep,  
lightly pale from anxiety.*

What exactly did Karla Hartl discover in the Moravian Museum in April of 2006? Under the number A29.725 there are three manuscripts:

- (A) A two-page piano sketch of 43 measures, the complete song.
- (B) An orchestral draft, with 31 complete measures, plus three more measures with sporadic scoring. The orchestration calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, celesta, cymbal, and strings.
- (C) A final orchestral score with 24 complete measures.

The manuscript of the final orchestral score is beautifully prepared in ink in Kaprálová's best handwriting, and the last measure goes to the end of the page, ending at the words *mé slzy na*. However, this is only the twenty-fourth measure, and even the orchestral draft has seven more complete measures. Thus, it was clear to me that Kaprálová had most likely completed all the orchestration, but we were missing some pages. A return trip by Karla Hartl to look for the missing pages in the Mora-

vian Museum in August 2010 proved fruitless, and Kaprálová's cousin, Josef Kaprál, was also at a loss as to where the missing pages could be. If we add the additional seven measures from the orchestral draft, then we are missing thirteen final measures. (Because Kaprálová added one opening measure to the orchestra manuscripts, then the total number of measures for the song is 44.) The question is, then, "can the final thirteen measures of orchestration be reconstructed from the complete piano sketch?" This was, in fact, my immediate goal, to reconstruct the missing orchestration.

If the final (incomplete) orchestral score represents some of Kaprálová's most beautiful notation, the piano sketch is an example of her worst. It is, after all, a sketch, with crossed-out notes and scribbles, and, unfortunately, the final measures are the most difficult to decipher. Also, unlike the first version of *Sbohem a šáteček*, clearly written for voice and piano and only later orchestrated, this sketch of *Smutný večer* reveals that Kaprálová meant for the song to be orchestrated from the beginning. There is one staff for the voice and mostly three staves for the piano, with quite a few parts of it unplayable for a pianist as written. Even calling it a "piano sketch," then, is not quite correct. In order to reconstruct the missing orchestration, however, those final measures had to be deciphered, and one key to making sense of those final measures in the sketch lay in accounting for *all* of the notes in the sketch. Comparing certain questionable pitches and accidentals to known markings among the various manuscripts would hopefully allow me to decipher the ending.

At this point, I was fortunate to be granted the assistance of an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Nicholas Skorina, as part of the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP). Armed with the latest version of Finale, his job has been to transcribe the orchestral score into printed notation, and to create orchestral parts. His work and observations have been extremely helpful. This project is still ongoing, and will finish with my reconstructed orchestration. If *Smutný večer* were in a simple ABA form, then the completion of the orchestration would not be so challenging, but the form is through-composed. Still, the mood and texture at the end of the song are reminiscent of the opening, so that a return to some of the orchestration at the beginning of the song seems to be called for. In the "piano" sketch, Kaprálová wrote *Celeste!* over the final measure, indicating she planned to use the celesta here, which had first entered at

m. 10. However, since the context is completely different from the other places in the orchestral score where Kaprálová used the celesta, and the remaining orchestration is missing, it is impossible to conjecture what notes she might have written for the instrument in this measure. My goal is to come as close as possible to the orchestral colors that the end of the song evokes, based on the rest of the song and on other orchestral works by Kaprálová, as well as the song *Leden*, a chamber piece with its own evocative colors and decadent poetry. The plan is to have this ready for its world premiere by sometime in 2015, the centenary of Kaprálová's birth, followed by a publication of the orchestral score.

In the meantime, a playable piano transcription needed to be made. As with orchestral songs by Ravel, Elgar, and many others, most performances would be with piano, and even if the song were to be sung with orchestra, singers would need to first learn the song with the piano. For this, my many hours of poring over Kaprálová's song manuscripts at the Moravian Museum, learning to decipher her shorthand, prepared me for the final measures of the "piano" sketch, my most difficult challenge. In this respect, Karla Hartl's discovery of the *Smutný večer* manuscript came at exactly the right time, so that after much deliberation, I feel that I was finally successful in deciphering the music in Kaprálová's sketch. Also, my years of experience playing orchestral transcriptions came to the fore as I worked to create a playable piano transcription that reflected Kaprálová's beautiful orchestration. (Except for the final measures, instruments are marked in Amos Editio's score, so that performers may be aware of the orchestral colors.)

After completing the piano transcription, the next step was to perform the work for a receptive audience. The occasion presented itself just as Amos Editio was in the final stages of preparing the piece for publication. The event was a song recital in the Weidner Center, Fort Howard Hall, at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, on November 19, 2011. The recital itself served as the opening of a larger event, the 11<sup>th</sup> International Czech & Slovak Voice Competition, held in Green Bay and Montreal every two years. The world premiere of *Smutný večer* with piano was with soprano Kimberly Haynes and myself. Ms. Haynes had been the

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first U.S. citizen to win the competition, in 2003, and as part of her prize she had performed five concerts in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 2004. (Memorable was her performance of “Navždy” in Brno with a very appreciative Josef Kaprál in attendance.) As with the body of Kaprálová’s works, the audience’s response was very enthusiastic. This was not all, however, for not only did this wonderful occasion offer the world premiere of *Smutný večer* (as transcribed for piano), but it also marked another milestone for Kaprálová’s songs—the awarding of the Kapralova Society prize for the best interpretation of a song by Vítězslava Kaprálová, as part of the international competition. This award stimulated further wonderful performances of Kaprálová’s songs, and the prize continued with the 12<sup>th</sup> competition in 2013.<sup>7</sup>

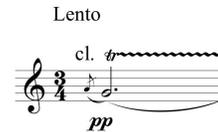
In *Smutný večer*, Kaprálová simply marked *Canto* for the voice part in her manuscripts. The range is:



It is suited, then, for soprano, tenor, and some mezzos, like the majority of Kaprálová’s songs. *Smutný večer* exhibits all the hallmarks of Kaprálová’s style. The composer captures the decadent, sad, vague, dream-like, yearning, and anxious qualities of the poem with a palette rich in orchestral colors and a beautifully declaimed vocal line that follows the natural inflection and emotions of the words. After a unique atmospheric opening section, the middle of the song expands to a more tonal, more Romantic section, and the song returns to a wistful, sad, and tonally vague section reminiscent of the beginning. This is similar to the ABA songs “Navždy,” “Píseň tvé nepřítomnosti,” and others, but in *Smutný večer* the writing is thicker, more layered, never quite leaving its anguished feeling, and *Smutný večer* does not fall into a simple ABA pattern.

Kaprálová preferred to write through-composed songs unified by simple motives that are tied to key words, with the ABA structure being her next favorite form. *Smutný večer* is similar to *Sbohem a šáteček* in that both are through-composed, both are unified by simple motives (the interval of a second for both), and both bring back material and feelings from the opening, giving the song an overall feeling of ABA'. The motivic use of a second is further evidence that Kaprálová may have been planning at one time a collection of orchestral songs, with all of

them sharing this motive. *Smutný večer* establishes the motive of a falling second with the clarinet’s opening trill (shown at sounding pitch, as in the piano transcription):



Ex. 1 *Smutný večer*, opening measure. © Amos Editio 2011.

The opening of *Sbohem a šáteček* also establishes the motive of a falling second, immediately joined by the voice with the word *sbohem/farewell*:

Ex. 2 *Sbohem a šáteček*, opening measure. © Amos Editio 2005

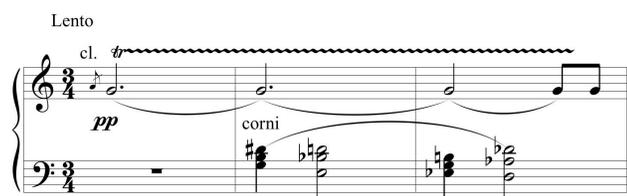
Seconds—and, thus, *farewells*—permeate *Sbohem a šáteček*. Even the opening of the unfinished voice-band version of *Navždy* opens with a second in the flute, this one ascending, but then descending, after a small drum sets up a rhythmic pattern:<sup>8</sup>

Ex. 3 Voice-band version of *Navždy*, opening measures.

The use of seconds in all three songs, however, is very unique to each song, so that there is no real sharing of material. If Kaprálová had originally planned for *Smutný večer*, *Sbohem a šáteček*, and the voice-band version of *Navždy* to be performed together, each song would have

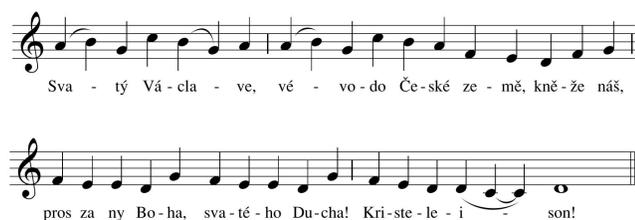
also featured its own special orchestral instrument, each a part of the same family—the celesta in *Smutný večer*, the piano in *Sbohem a šáteček*, and the harp in *Navždy*.<sup>9</sup>

Seconds, mostly falling, occur throughout *Smutný večer*. Right after the opening clarinet trill, we hear them in the horns:



Ex. 4 *Smutný večer*, opening measures with horn chords. © Amos Editio 2011

Horns have traditionally symbolized distance, and here, combined with the unstable harmony and suspended trill, they depict the *sound of weeping from long ago*, sung soon after. The top line of the horns even vaguely recalls the twelfth-century Czech *Wenceslaus Chorale*, namely the four notes (in the example below C-B-G-A) on King Wenceslaus' name, *Václav*, the great Czech king who was murdered by his brother. It has been quoted in the works of other Czech composers, such as Pavel Haas:<sup>10</sup>

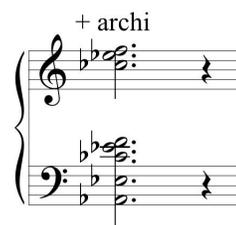


Ex. 5 *Wenceslaus Chorale*

The intervals are not exact, but still suggestive, and certainly add to the feeling of vague, distant, sad memories from somewhere deep in one's being. The horns also utilize the interval of a third, also a recurring motive throughout *Smutný večer*, although not as pervasive as the interval of a second.<sup>11</sup> We soon associate all the opening seconds with weeping, as the first time that seconds appear in the vocal line is in the first sentence with the words *v tichu zní dávný pláč*, literally *in silence there sounds a long-ago weeping*. The celesta also enters for the first time with these words, playing the same chords of the horns.

As heard in the opening chords of the horns, harmonies

throughout the song tend to be based on the pervasive seconds and thirds, as well. An especially striking chord occurs on the second phrase of the text with the words *Vzpomínka bloudí po čele jak tajuplný zaklínač*/Memory wanders across my forehead like an otherworldly conjurer, where the chord repeats on the downbeat of every measure while the vocal line abounds in falling seconds, and the violins and violas enter for the first time:



Ex. 6 "Memory" chord. © Amos Editio 2011.

This exact chord returns at the very end of the song, on the words *úzkostí*/with anxiety and *bledý*/pale, in the sentence *Z krystalu ticha přede spánek úzkostí lehce bledý*/From the crystal of silence spins a sleep, lightly pale from anxiety, and forms the very last sounds of the song with the voice, suggesting that the memory, bound up with long-ago weeping, is fading with the singer into sleep.<sup>12</sup>

Before the third sentence of the poem, there is a short orchestral interlude rich in seconds. A solo violin enters with its own weeping seconds just before the singer sings *It is an evening of bitter tears*. The celesta, with its weeping chords, enters again to underscore the text *cold gray clouds are raining my tears*, along with a viola solo. The word *slzy*/tears expands to the interval of a third, and the voice line soars to a G at the word *přání*/wishes. Along with the text's description of *blossoming* and *sprouting*, the full orchestra blossoms into an impassioned Romantic passage reminiscent of the early song "Jitro," beautifully melodic while still based on seconds and thirds. When the voice enters, its intervals expand, as if trying to break free of the sad and weeping seconds and thirds. A new height is reached, a high A-sharp, on the word *touhy*/of desire (so, from *wishes* on a G to *desire* on an A-sharp). At *tichý samotář*/the quiet recluse, however, the seconds from the earlier solo violin passage return, along with thirds, and the voice

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part moves back mostly to its sad intervals of seconds and thirds, as the opening horn chords return at the words *from the crystal of silence*. After the voice descends to its lowest note of the whole song, on the word *úzkostí/with anxiety*, it ascends and floats away to a C-flat above the final chord of distant memories, mentioned above, Ex. 6. The final chord, however, has one extra note, a B-flat, clashing with the C-flat of the voice and the chord. For Kaprálová, this note can be no accident—the B-flat, enharmonically an A-sharp, is an echo of the voice's high A-sharp, the pitch expressing *touhy/of desires*. Desire now melds with vague memories and a sleep grown pale with anxiety.

There is one instrument that I could not account for in the piano transcription—a cymbal. It plays from the very first measure, *pianissimo*, on the third beat, and continues to play on the third beat of every measure through m. 9, just before the celesta enters for the first time. Surely the cymbal, and the celesta, must be part of the *crystal of silence* mentioned in the last sentence, and surely the cymbal will find a place near the end of the song in the reconstructed orchestration, along with the celesta that Kaprálová noted in the last measure in her first draft.

Through the assistance of the Kapralova Society, and under the direction of editor Věroslav Němec, Amos Editio in Prague published their beautiful edition of *Smutný večer* with my piano transcription in early December 2011.<sup>13</sup> The song is about 3 ½ minutes long. Pairing *Smutný večer* with *Sbohem a šáteček*, even with just piano, would make for very interesting programming! No matter the programming, however, *Smutný večer* has proven to be yet another beautiful gem to stand alongside Kaprálová's other outstanding works, and alongside all the great works of the art song repertoire. I look forward to performing it again, to hearing many others perform it, and to hearing the orchestral version, all in the coming years.

*Notes*

The Supraphon CD *Vítězslava Kaprálová: Songs* can be ordered as a download in MP3 format at [supraphonline.cz](http://supraphonline.cz), where there is also the option of purchasing the informative original CD booklet (FLAC + MP3); or as an MP3 download at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk), etc.; or at [ax.itunes.apple.com](http://ax.itunes.apple.com). The *Women of Firsts* album is on the Centaur label, available through [centaurrecords.com](http://centaurrecords.com), [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), and [ax.itunes.apple.com](http://ax.itunes.apple.com).

<sup>2</sup> Karla Hartl, "Vítězslava Kaprálová: An Annotated Catalog of

Works." In Karla Hartl and Erik Entwistle, *The Kaprálová Companion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 183.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-one measures are completed (through "někdo odejde a zas se"), and although about forty-one more measures are sketched, they cannot be reconstructed.

<sup>5</sup> Hartl, *The Kaprálová Companion*, 166.

<sup>6</sup> Kaprálová had a great taste for poetry and also wrote poetry herself. One of her poems, *Podzimní* (Autumnal, from 1932), is somewhat similar in mood and style to that of *Sad Evening*. (— ed.)

<sup>7</sup> Yet another milestone was the inauguration of the annual Moravian Master Class by founder and head Mirka Zemanová in 2012. The summer vocal program emphasizes the study of Czech art song and opera by Moravian composers, including Kaprálová: [www.moravianmasterclass.com](http://www.moravianmasterclass.com).

<sup>8</sup> The interval of a descending second also found its way into the now well-known piano and voice version of "Navždy," although it does not begin with that interval.

<sup>9</sup> *Sbohem a šáteček* also adds two trumpets and timpani to its orchestration; the voice-band *Navždy* would have omitted violas and double bass. Apparently Kaprálová had originally considered writing *Sbohem a šáteček* for voice-band—see Jiří Macek, *Vítězslava Kaprálová* (Prague: Svaz českých skladatelů, 1958), 170.

<sup>10</sup> See Haas's *Four Songs on Chinese Poetry* in which the four-note motive occurs throughout the cycle, from the very first measure.

<sup>11</sup> See the thirds in the voice-band version of *Navždy*, Ex. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Compare this chord with the chord in the opening measure of *Sbohem a šáteček*, Ex. 2, with its fifth in the bass and the intervals of a second and third at the top of the chord.

<sup>13</sup> Libraries can easily order it through the distributor Harrasowitz. Individuals can order through the Prague music store Talacko, at [talacko.cz](http://talacko.cz), or through Amos Editio, at [amoseditio.cz](http://amoseditio.cz). A world premiere MP3 recording appeared in 2013 with the wonderful performance by soprano Hélène Lindqvist and Philipp Vogler. It can be listened to for free at *The Art Song Project*, [theartsongproject.com](http://theartsongproject.com).

*About the author*

Vocal coach and pianist Timothy Cheek is associate professor of performing arts/vocal arts at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. Cheek's championing of the works of Vítězslava Kaprálová led to his performing several world premieres of her songs, and to lecture/performances on the composer around the USA and in Europe. Following his recording of the complete songs of Kaprálová with celebrated Czech soprano Dana Burešová on Supraphon records, nominated for the best recording of 2003 by the Czech journal *Harmonie*, and acclaimed by numerous critics in journals such as *Fanfare* and *BBC Music Magazine*, Cheek edited a critical edition of the songs of Kaprálová for the Czech publisher Amos Editio in 2006.

# Sad Evening

## Smutný večer

Vítězslava Kaprálová

Lento

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Bassoon

Horn in F

Celesta

Cymbal

Voice

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

*pp*

*sf*

*con sord.*

*pp*

*Un piatto con molta bacchetta*

This digital transcript of the orchestral score fragment is provided courtesy of Nicholas Skorina.

## THERE WILL BE JOY

An interview with French conductor Laurence Equilbey

*Is there such a thing as unhealthy addiction to a piece of music? If yes, I have it. For months now, I cannot stop watching the recording of Laurence Equilbey conducting Mozart's Great Mass in C Minor, which found its way to the internet after it was first broadcast by the German-French TV channel Arte. The work is a stunner, spanning the emotional gamut from agony to ecstasy, but I've heard it many times before so it's not only Mozart and good musicians that make it so appealing: it's the fact of having a woman conduct it with such intensity and seriousness. It feels like some ancient pain in my soul is being cured – at least for the duration of the recording. The meaning of the conductor, the maleness of the figure, are undermined. New images fight the old, ingrained images. I can't help returning to this: half of the views in the view count under that video must be mine.*

*Equilbey's discography is equally intriguing. After finishing her studies in Vienna and returning to Paris, she founded the chamber choir Accentus and proceeded to explore the Romantic macabre of the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth century modernism, neither among the most crowd-pleasing musical traditions. How often do you think during the day, "Right at this moment, I really need to be in the abstract hypnotic loop of the a cappella Strauss, or ponder the end of life to Dvořák's Stabat Mater?" Well, you will after spending some time with Equilbey and Accentus on Radio. I do now, and I used to be the worst Baroque glutton imaginable, gorging on the pleasure, effortless beauty and dance beats of the music of the pre-Classical at every opportunity. Now I actually play Requiems to myself, and Poulenc's bleak song cycles about the Second World War, and the explosion of Czech consonants that is Philippe Manoury's "Slova."*

*There is a lot of death and grieving in the choral repertoire of the nineteenth century, and a lot of musical madness in the twentieth, but Equilbey approaches both with remarkable cool. "Nothing to worry about. I can help you figure this stuff out," seems to be the unspoken attitude. So here is this petite figure, in her flawless suits and pressed dress shirts, treading the most patriarchal rings of the western musical canon with her light step, removing pathos here, opulence there, sentimentality over there, old connotations further there, melodrama over in that corner, reviv-*

*ing little known works, bringing to light women composers like Louise Farrenc and championing new creations.*

*After many years of the guest conducting gigs with a whole lot of European orchestras – Concerto Köln, Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Orchestre de Chambre de Paris, Opéra de Rouen Haute-Normandie, Brussels Philharmonic, Camerata Salzburg are just some of them – Equilbey created her own period ensemble last year. Insula Orchestra's mandate is Classical and pre-Romantic, the late eighteenth and very early nineteenth. As this includes Mozart and Beethoven, one thing is clear: there will be joy. The awe-inducing, somber a cappella chamber choir repertoire will give way to – OK, OK, make ample room for – the denizens of the Classical era, the masters and the lesser performed composers both. Insula's first season opened, auspiciously, with the mentioned Mozart Mass in C.*

*We are meeting in Laurence Equilbey's Montmartre apartment. As I get close to the door, I hear her telling her little dog to quiet down. Suddenly I'm anxious. What good can ever come out of the encounter between a human and a god from her musical pantheon? There is still time to turn around and run away. I could be home right now, watching her conduct Schumann on Vimeo. But the door opens and it's done. Threshold crossed. And so we talk: she in French and I in English.*

### I. THE FIGURE OF THE CONDUCTOR

**LYDIA PEROVIC:** Is the conductor something of a shaman? I can't stop watching the recording of your Mass in C minor. Commanding a huge crowd of instrumentalists and singers always looks a bit like a pagan ritual, something to do with magic... There's this figure at the centre, directing all the different forces – but it's a woman for a change.

**LAURENCE EQUILBEY:** The most important thing for the conductor is that he or she listens. Her listening will make things sound a certain way. If the conductor listens well, the musicians listen to each other better. The conductor can in effect impose a certain kind of listening for everybody. And yes, she is also a vector, the music

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passes through her, but it's a permanent exchange: the musician gives me, I request, we exchange... If all I do is demand without really seeing what the musician gives, it won't work. There needs to be a fusion of gestures. That's very important. And then it can expand to include the audience too. Of course, the conductor is also essential for controlling the balances, the tempos. And she has to inspire people.

LP: But I've also read somewhere that you argue that the conductor should try to be diaphanous and neutral?

LE: They should give an impression of neutrality, but this is not quite the case because they need to embody at the same time. But ultimately, yes, I don't like the showmen conductors. And it depends on the work. There are works that simply demand that the conductor embody distinctly, and others that don't. In general, I prefer my conductors to be on the sincere side. They are engrossed by the work, but with a kind of modesty, without being too demonstrative.

LP: All the while, the orchestras and concerts and recordings are 'sold' via the conductor. And the conductor's photo is usually on the cover of the program and the web page.

LE: The conductor always has the final cut, musically. But there's no need to belabor the point while on the podium. Then marketing is separate, it will do its own thing.

LP: Isn't that such a womanly thing to say, I don't want to stand out?

LE: These days I'm more authoritarian with the orchestras than I used to be. You need to hold your ground, I've noticed, or you'll be swept aside. When you work with your own ensemble, it's like making chamber music, but when you're the invited conductor, you need to know how to obtain what you need.

LP: I suspect that women more than men have a problem asserting authority before fellow musicians – and that that's why some decide not to pursue the conducting career. Standing on the podium means: I own this work as much as the men, I have something to say. Listen.

LE: When I have to negotiate that, I do it in more roundabout ways. The difficulty is sometimes in working with the soloists. With a group of people, it's easier to say, I want this, this and this. It's different with the soloists, because they are the ones who will be in the spotlight. You can't

force an interpretation on them. With soloists, it's all about diplomacy, especially in our age – the time of the authoritarian conductor is behind us, we don't work the way Karajan or Toscanini did...

LP: Is it important that the conductor has a clear idea of the work in her mind ahead of rehearsals?

LE: Yes. About eighty percent of the work is before you even start. At the rehearsals there will be things you'll notice when you hear the actual, material sound, but normally you need to start with a very precise vision. Especially because today the production time is fairly short and it runs out quickly. There is no time to go, Okay, now let me ponder this... You have to know from the beginning.

LP: Do you ever watch your recordings?

LE: Yes, especially the Master Classes, and I often ask the opera houses to share their internal video. I review myself and I don't really like much of what I see. Maybe about twenty percent of everything. So I try to work out why I liked what I liked, and why I disliked the rest.

LP: Your technique is always evolving, it seems.

LE: And I still have a coach in England. I don't go very often, but when the questions pile up, I go and ask them.

LP: There must be a big difference between conducting an a cappella choir and a large orchestra. The baton, for example, is not always there.

LE: I use the baton for Mozart and later works. For Bach, for instance, I don't bring it out. It also depends on the size of the orchestra – the baton elongates your arm, makes the gesture a bit more academic, and the orchestra needs clarity in gestures. Baton is also a stand-in for the bow. Where strings are heavily involved, the baton helps. Then there are accents within beats, and bare hands are not very apt at pointing them out. With the baton, they're more drawn out. Conducting is more elegant with the baton.

LP: I understand your approach to music is often inspired by visual arts? They're seemingly two distant disciplines.

LE: Like many musicians, I can hear the weight in the

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sound. Sound is matter. We speak of the color of an instrument, of transparency... We can demand more somber or lighter colors, deeper playing and singing, heavier or lighter sound. And manipulating those means is like creating a painting. There's a spectrum of possibilities. You can underline the bass, or not at all. You can create something that is well-anchored or that is floating and never arriving. You can make a melodic line dominant or barely visible. The conducting gesture is akin to painting or sculpture. It's in the visual arts that I most clearly see our society. It's a very inventive discipline, and it resonates with our life in the present. It's in fact part of the job of the visual artist to say something to her contemporaries. I also find that it's a milieu that's much more open to women than classical music. There is, in general, a better circulation in visual art, the greatest degree of freedom. All this inspires me.

LP: Any particular artists?

LE: There are works that inspire me in their abstraction – for example by people like John McCracken, Ellsworth Kelly, or even Anish Kapoor, people who make art that is at the same time very material and very abstract. I am always impressed by that. I also go to the theatre a lot; I like Heiner Goebbels, also Christoph Marthaler, Robert Lepage...

LP: What kind of things do you read?

LE: Mostly non-fiction: ancient treatises, biographies, books of rhetoric.

## II. THE ROMANTIC NOIR

LP: I wanted to ask you about the Romantics and the musical nineteenth century that you're so much at home with. I find it alien. They were patriarchal, religious, loved killing off women in operas, and had this humorless all-or-nothing view of love. Compared with gender in Mozart or the Baroque, they seem to me narrower, tighter – a regression.

LE: I am not so much interested in the love stories of the nineteenth... it's their intellectual, poetic side that attracts me, not the melodrama. Also their fascination with machines and automatons, the idea of progress, the awakening of the deeper will of the peoples... I've conducted Schumann's Last Ballades, for instance, and that work is profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment.

Under the guise of medieval love stories set in castles etc., Schumann actually encourages social revolt and struggle for liberty.

LP: What about the rise of nationalism in culture?

LE: The artists of the time wanted to rediscover the melos, the inner music of the people. They argued that this uncovered melody would bring to light previously unspoken truths. So it had more to do with democratization than with nationalism as we understand it today.

LP: I know you're interested in staging Schubert's unfinished *Lazarus*... There's another peculiar work of the era.

LE: It can be a surprising piece for today's audience, as it probably was in its own time, so I'd say it needs to be staged and the ending composed. If performed in concert, it may come across as too austere. The form consists of a series of arias, which doesn't sound too exciting, but the text is beautiful.

LP: I have the impression that somehow there are fewest women conductors precisely in this repertoire, the nineteenth century Romantic. I can think of maybe one woman who's allowed to conduct Wagner: Simone Young.

LE: There is more than one, though. Marin Alsop, Xian Zhang... She is fantastic. Chinese by origin, with a permanent post with a Milan orchestra. There are women, but they are not invited by the orchestras. It's a conservative world, classical music. Numbers are bad even for women soloists. In France, women make up five percent of all the soloists in concerts. The numbers for conductors and soloists are horrible. It's completely closed. But women have started voicing their discontent and the French Ministry of Culture has started noticing, so maybe something will change.

## III. THE FIVE PERCENT

LP: You yourself commissioned a report two years ago – a simple count of women in positions of artistic responsibility in performing arts, conductors, directors, things of that sort... and the numbers were depressing.

LE: Yes. But at least the results were noted and the report made some waves. Now we're finally talking about the issue.

LP: At the same time, nobody wants to introduce quotas.

LE: No, but there is the bare minimum which we should aspire to – one third at least of women. We cannot accept current numbers. At the Paris Opera, ninety-five percent of conductors and directors are men this year.

LP: Oh yes, I watched that video of La Barbe interrupting the season announcement at the Garnier. That was neat.

LE: The audience was terrible, though.

LP: I couldn't believe they booed and hissed.

LE: La Barbe also did an intervention once at the Salle Pleyel and somebody from the audience – a woman – yelled at them, “But men are better musicians than women!”

LP: !!!

LE: I'd really like to see some evolution here. This question is becoming very hard for me, the question of music in France – in Europe in general. Musicians ought to reclaim some of the power in the houses of production. The opera houses are run either by managers or by stage directors, never by musicians. And then, there is the question of women. Musical milieu needs to stop being single-gendered. There's no air, you can't breathe. It's always the same people... It's a problem.

LP: Most women in your position don't want to raise this issue. They can't afford to rock the boat.

LE: I know. But I'll be fine. I want to see other women around me. I know a lot of women who are incredibly talented but who don't work, and this bothers me. And we're talking about institutions that are funded with public money, for which all the citizens are paying through their taxes. It's a question of equality, and things will start moving once people realize that. We don't need to raise it as a question of ethics etc. Equality is the vernacular in France and it may be the only value that will instigate some change here. But the men aren't very cooperative. If you ask any man about this disparity, they'll respond cynically.

#### IV. THE PRESENT OF THE CLASSICAL

LP: What do you think accounts for the relative unpopularity of the classical music in our time?

LE: I think the classical music is on a dangerous down-

ward slope, because it's not seeking strong enough resonance with its society. Opera is the same. There are a lot of arts organizations – us included – that do all sorts of outreach, pedagogical, cultural, but that's not enough. People need to feel close to the art form. Music is distant from the people, I find, here in France. Its importance is waning.

LP: Is the audience aging here as well? It is in North America.

LE: It is here too.

LP: Does this distance that people feel from the music have to do with arts education, maybe?

LE: It does. I think something urgently needs to be done in elementary schools, maybe even kindergarten, about ear training. Not much is being done at the moment. Later in high school, there's something like an hour a week of music, and it's treated like a history lesson.

LP: What about amateur musicianship? That's fading away too.

LE: The most musical peoples are those with a strong tradition of musicianship at home. Nordic countries are particularly good at this. When the ear is trained in childhood, there's often a desire to practice music at home.

LP: It's also perhaps a question of letting the audience be less regimented in classical music concerts. I know you introduced the audience sing-along to the operetta production at Opéra Comique that you recently conducted.

LE: That was great. I'm glad we did it.

LP: What else would you allow as a musician? Food and drink? Tweeting? Dancing?

LE: Depends on the project. For Ciboulette, it was really easy to imagine the audience singing. I hope to keep doing projects that have elements of audience participation. But it largely depends on the music. If music is light, fine. If it's a more complex musical vocabulary that needs to be listened to, then we need to listen. If it's waltz music, feel free to chat amongst yourselves.

*Lydia Perović is a Canadian writer and publicist based in Toronto. Her first novel *Incidental Music* was published by York University's Inanna Publications and Education in Toronto in 2012. This interview was first published by *The Believer* on August 1, 2013. It is reprinted here by permission.*

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