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Yvette Guilbert: La Disense

Erin Hackel

Yvette Guilbert, of the voice, a bend of that curious long thin body which seems to be embodied gesture, she can suggest, she can portray the humor that is dry, ironical, coarse (I will admit), unctuous even. Her voice can be sweet or harsh; it can chirp, lilt, chuckle, stutter; it can moan or laugh, be tipsy or distinguished. Nowhere is she conventional; nowhere does she even resemble any other French singer.¹

To Sing a Song is to perform a vocal drama, where the vocal skill is not always of first importance.²

Highly innovative and wildly provocative, Yvette Guilbert was driven from her very first steps on the stage to bring a higher art to her audiences. A self-proclaimed singer with a range of only four notes, she was to overcome crushing rejection to become one of the first stars of the Moulin Rouge, one of the highest paid singers in Europe, and one of the innovators of the *chanson réaliste* style. She was a voracious reader, highly opinionated on any and all topics, and acquainted with and connected to all the literary and artistic *ton* of *La Belle Époque*. Her carefully developed artistic persona, seen through the eyes of her audience, shows how she changed the context and content of what was entertainment in late 19th century and early 20th century Paris.

Yvette Guilbert was born in Paris in 1865. Her father gambled heavily and spent all he earned, leaving Yvette and her mother to support themselves by doing bead and millinery work. Workdays were long and food was scarce. Dressmaking ran in seasons, and in the slack season they were forced to sell their furniture and linens to purchase food. Driven by a need to make more money, Yvette took to the stage, in conventional theater work. At the time, actresses were expected to provide their own costumes, a not insignificant expense, so when a fellow actor suggested she might earn quite a bit more money singing at the café-concerts, she embraced the idea.

The Parisian café-concert was one of the popular music venues of the time, with ties to

vaudeville, cabaret and the music hall tradition. The repertoire was often risqué or bawdy, and comedic pieces were a staple. At the time, the café-concert performance was considered quite low class compared to the theater, but to the poverty stricken Yvette, the idea of a higher pay was irresistible. She auditioned at the Eldorado, a large concert venue in Paris in 1889, and was reluctantly engaged by the proprietress on a limited basis. Excited for the opportunity, she began travelling to all the Parisian café-concerts to research style and the singers. The traditional singer at these venues was coarse, often vulgar, and played to the lowest common denominator of the drunken crowds. Coming directly from the higher-class theater tradition, Yvette was appalled at what she found:

In the largest halls, just as in the smallest, I noted the stupidity, the ghastly stupidity of the lines. How idiotic it all was! And yet the public was pleased and genuinely enjoying itself. My heart sank at the thought that it would be my task to amuse such a crowd.³

Dismayed but determined to earn more money, she drew on what she loved about the theater: a sense of artistic excellence, of Art as a higher form. She felt it was within her to educate Parisian café-concert audiences on what a truly artistic singing experience could be. Above all, she decided she would “strike an absolutely new note.”⁴ Which she did right

Special points of interest:

The Art of Vaudeville Song

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Yvette Guilbert

away, heading for the song publisher's offices. It was there that she found a summer engagement, from a director of a music hall in Lyons, desperate to fill a lead singing position. Yvette saw this as the perfect opportunity to try out her new repertoire before her official debut.

Guilbert arrived at the Casino in Lyons in her formal theater gown and waited backstage to go on. The crowd was a group of noisy students, vastly entertained by the first singer, whom Guilbert vividly described as: "Perspiring, breathless, her ample bosom heaving, her arms red with heat, she was like a great lobster, her eyes popping out of her head."⁵ Guilbert stood frozen with fear backstage, the reality of what she was supposed to be as a café-concert singer and what she was going to try to do glaringly obvious. She entered the stage, sang her first song, and was promptly forced to leave as the audience heckled her mercilessly. Trying to come back on, the howls of disapproval were so intense they had to lower the curtain. She left after five days into her ten-day engagement; the audience refused to hear her, and would roar with dismay the moment she stepped on stage. This kind of debacle would dissuade any ordinary singer, but Guilbert was no ordinary singer. Displaying the confidence that would stay with her for her entire career, she vowed to the director that she would return triumphant, saying:

Listen, M. Verdelle, your café-concert, as it is at present, is out of date, ugly, common, and, oh! So! Stupid! Well, remember my name, and you'll see I'll set your café-concert on its feet again . . . before the year is out I am positive that I shall come back here at twelve hundred a night—before a year is out, mind you!⁶

She set out for home and began practicing in earnest for her upcoming debut in Paris. Her mother, hearing her sing, said: "Listen, my dear. I really think you would be much wiser to return to the stage. I have been listening to you for days and days, and I assure you that you are not on the right path."⁷ Guilbert was undeterred, and went on to her big debut at the Eldorado. The audience received her in silence, night after night. She was finally moved on the bill to an earlier time, forcing her to sing to an empty hall.

Success did not arrive until she settled on her distinctive stage look and her repertoire. Both were designed to be in direct opposition to her contemporaries in the café-concerts. She would counteract their vulgar tendencies with a stark and upper-class appearance: a simple, long dress, pale face, red hair swept up and no make up save a single slash of red across her lips. Her signature became a pair of black gloves extending to the upper arm; these were intended to be "accepted as a hallmark of elegance in an atmosphere that was rather low and somewhat coarse of wit."⁸ Her repertoire would be subtle and daring:

Out of all the brazen impurities, all the excesses, all the vices of my contemporaries I would offer an exhibition of humorous sketches in song, and give them an opportunity of laughing at themselves (certainly no one ever cried over them!). There, that would be my contribution, my treasure-trove of novelty.⁹

She found a small book at a booksellers stall, titled *Les Chansons sans-gêne*, by Léon Xanrof, a Parisian humorist, playwright and songwriter. It contained enthralling verses with ironic descriptions of the Parisian student life embodied at the Parisian cabarets. Guilbert knew she had found her repertoire, and she lucked into an engagement at the Liège. The songs she chose, including the iconic *Le Fiacre*, *L'hôtel du numéro 3* and *De Profundis* were promptly scored and learned along with an arrangement of her own poem, *La Pocharde*. She brought down the house. That evening at the Liège was triumphant for the young singer who had known nothing but rejection to this point; her determination and vision were rewarded by 10 curtain calls that night.

It is certainly worth noting that the café-concert at the time was not the ideal audience for Guilbert's form of half-spoken social commentary. The cabarets, such as Le Chat Noir, with performers and audiences well tuned to satire and the macabre would have been a far more appropriate venue for her. It seems clear from her frequent and detailed accounting of contract negotiations that finances were behind this decision. The cabarets paid little to nothing, with female artists often resorting to prostitution to supplement their tiny incomes; the café-concerts, with coarser, less educated audiences paid quite well. Her impoverished childhood worked against her desire to sing sophisticated repertoire to sophisticated audiences in this regard: she was artistically controlled by managers, audiences and censors in a way she would not have been in the cabarets.¹⁰

Her excitement at finding a repertoire that evoked both the Naturalistic and Realist movements were to be tempered by the audiences she chose to sing for. Her choice of dignified and formal dress was to directly contrast the bawdy and humorous songs she sang, laced with satire and social commentary. Texts were brutal, crass and sung in local dialects, and performed to shock; one clear example is *Le Foetus*, a brutal song about aborted fetuses. In the end, she was continually frustrated by her audiences' inability to see that she was satirizing them, yet her great success came from these same audiences' response to the overt message, rather than the underlying one.

In 1890, she decided to take more control over her repertoire. She left a contract at the Éden-Concert to the penalty of a large fine. She had to find employment quickly, so she ap-

proached a friend who had just started a new theater, the Moulin Rouge. It was there, and then more completely at the Divan Japonais, that she became known for her distinctive artistry and fearless performances of audacious lyrics. Her performance aesthetics was so markedly different from that of her predecessors, she was causing quite a sensation just by standing still. British poet and critic Arthur Symons saw her perform and described her clearly:

She uses but few gestures, and these brief, staccato, and for an immediate purpose; her hands, in their long black gloves, are almost motionless, the arms hang limply; and yet every line of the face and body seems alive, alive and repressed. Her voice can be harsh or sweet, as she would have it, can laugh or cry, be menacing or caressing; it is never used for its own sake, decoratively, but for a purpose, for an effect. And how every word tells! Every word comes to you clearly, carrying exactly its meaning; and somehow, along with the words, an emotion, which you may resolve to ignore, but which will seize upon you, which will go through and through you. Trick or instinct, there it is, the power to make you feel intensely; and that is precisely the final test of a great dramatic artist.¹¹

Of course, she was distinctly that: a dramatic artist. Her great idea, to bring the techniques of the theater into the music hall only required that she be a “singer” as a formality. She has this to say about her art:

My enunciation adds to my pronunciation, of which I take the greatest care, and which I know to be very fine. Added to this pronunciation there is my diction—that is to say, the movement of the phrase, the analysis of the meaning of the words, plus the expressiveness of its form. All the artistic resourcefulness and skill of the actor, in the hands of a singer without a voice, and who bids the piano or the orchestra sing for her—that is really my art. . . . It is my brain that gives color to my voice and enables it to take on volume if necessary, and gives it a kind of likeness to the singer’s voice.¹²

L’Art de chanter une chanson

In 1918, Guilbert published one of the first texts for popular singers who wished to learn to sing contemporary repertoire. This wonderful book speaks directly to non-classical singers, and offers extremely practical and detailed advice. She begins by firmly placing the *Chansonneur* in a position of having a much more challenging job than a mere opera singer:

The singers who have what is called “one register”

normally placed, like operatic stars, are out of question for the art of singing a song. Their voices can be as fine as possible, if they are not multiple, they will not be able to render the song “justly,” they will deform it by too rich or too stiff a voice—always limited to their register.¹³

The text details her conversations with both Gounod and Verdi, and how they begged her not to train her voice and kill the expression and life in it with a classical technique. She asserts that she challenged Verdi as to the inappropriateness of setting the sentimental supper scene in *La Traviata* with such up-tempo music. According to Yvette, he said: “If we had on the operatic stage singers of songs such as you are, we would write music appropriate to the words.”¹⁴

Guilbert clearly marks the difference between an operatic technique and a *chansonneur* technique as being an approach to registration. The chansonneur must master singing in all registers, including *en poitrine* (chest voice), with an emphasis on a lack of uniformity. The voice must be placed in the *masque* and have a highly nuanced character, able to engage in “the supreme art of coloring the words.”¹⁵ She gives technical exercises in breathing, centered on controlling exhalation, and extremely specific examples of how to correctly color words and interpret lyrics to add nuance and color. Her work in the theater comes through strongly in her text: she demands that the singer both “amplify” and “penetrate” the text; in other words, study and embody each character completely. The penetration of text involves exploring the intent of the author, to move beyond the words to the sentiment behind them. The amplification of text is a careful treatment of each word, coloring and animating as the artist deems necessary. This might involve adding a simple refrain, or otherwise altering the text or music. She does caution that amplification can be overdone:

You will find easily the amplification of a text, if you are penetrated by the subject of your song. Of course you must not abuse it. Not many songs require amplification; you must feel when it is needed and permitted.¹⁶

Her extremely detailed ideas about conveying tragedy, both from the viewpoints of someone observing and someone experiencing it, are certainly based on theatrical techniques. Her ideas surrounding comic pieces, one of her stocks in trade in the café-concerts, were colored by her disgust with the singularly over the top and vulgar comedy so prevalent in other café-concert singers. She firstly admonishes her readers that they are either born with the ability to perform comedic pieces or they are not, and therefore should not even attempt them. Most interestingly, she divides the Comic Spirit into four dis-

Yvette Guilbert

tinct colors:

Gray, a refined humor, designed to produce *le sourire au coin des lèvres* (the smile at the corner of the lips). She illustrates this with the 18th century rondeau, *La défense inutile*.

Red, joyful and bright, designed to produce a laugh from the audience, and the type of comedy Guilbert considered to be “the limit of good taste in comedy.”¹⁷ She cautions her students not to allow their red humor to wander into slapstick. Red comedy is illustrated with a “farcical peasant” song, *Ah! Que l’amour cause de peine!*

Purple, would be used to express songs that have a subtle humor, one of double entendre and nuance. These were her stock in trade during her Moulin Rouge and Divan Japonais days, and she calls them *chansons immobiles*: no movements, gestures or coloring of the voice to indicate comedy. The comedy is conveyed with the eyes alone, and in the act of stillness of body and flatness of tone. The singer is a *pince-sans-rire* (tongue-in-cheek) or *comique-à-froid* (deadpan or dry humor). To illustrate this comedic color she uses her iconic song by Xanrof, *L’hôtel du numéro 3*.

Vermillion, which she characterizes as the comedy of the *commedia dell’arte*. This comedy color is so coarse and vulgar that she can find no occasion to utilize these “grimaces of face, as well as grimaces of voice.”¹⁸ There are those, she says, who perform in such a fashion in France, but their work in provoking cheap laughter to an uneducated crowd cannot be considered Art.

Guilbert’s book seriously considers a more theatrical idea of how the modern singer should present themselves on stage. She calls this the “Plastic Art,” and it involves a dance like approach to holding the body and gesturing, *avoir de la ligne* (and to posture). The text includes wonderful photos of one of her pupils illustrating proper movements to accompany a song, many of which would seem completely artificial and overdone to 21st century eyes. These ideas of body movement and presentation for a popular artist must have been truly new and innovative. Guilbert says:

You might consider it perhaps an exaggeration or a pedantry to ask a singer to practice gymnastics for her appearance on the stage. But believe me, your audience will appreciate the difference between your gesture of picking flowers in plastic beauty and the gesture of a peasant woman digging out her potatoes.¹⁹

She suggests that the plastic art can be acquired through astute observation of sculpture and art, reflecting the theme throughout the text that hard work and study of art and artists is the basis for success. Separately, the idea of a “eurythmic expression of the body”²⁰ is addressed, as one of grace and of an elegant choreography of texts that might require them. Facial expressions are offered in fantastic detail, with photos of Guilbert herself performing such sentiments as “The Presentiment of Danger,” “Moral Pain,”

“Physical Pain,” “Raging Rage,” and “Cruelty.” She offers details about “The Two Appeals,” those of the eyes and of the lips, and how women especially can utilize these to great effect, whether they are “thin-lipped and pale” or “thick-lipped and red.”²¹

Reinvention

To get out of my environment, to create a new repertoire, that was my dream. And I fulfilled it. Ten years of a repertoire of boulevard indecencies, and twenty-six years of the lovely songs of France. That is my balance-sheet today.²²

Guilbert had achieved great artistic and monetary success by the beginning of the 20th century. She was commanding large monthly salaries for performing nightly to large crowds, (30,000 francs, approximately \$138,000 per month in today’s currency), but she became aware that she was now known primarily as a singer of bawdy songs rather than the Naturalist and Realist artist she had imagined herself to be. Her firm financial position facilitated a move to a historical repertoire that had begun to fascinate her. She began to construct programs of the historical songs of France, from the 11th century forward, to present to her audiences, in full authentic costume. Once again, she faced criticism and struggles, for her audiences loved her for the artist she had been, not the artist that she wanted to become. From 1900–1907 she offered this repertoire to unhappy audiences, until her temerity once again paid off with some success, though she was never to regain the audiences and accolades she had achieved at the beginning of her career.

She began to perform abroad, in Canada and the United States. Her programs there reflect her passion for research and study. While she included the iconic songs of Montmartre that audiences expected of her, the bulk of her programming on a seven-year stay in the United States reflect an ever-changing program of meticulously researched and presented historical songs of France.

Guilbert certainly regarded her time in America as purely mercenary. Her thoughts on the wealthy, young country were not subtle:

[Americans] are bitterly offended when they hear an artist confess that he comes to the United States for the sake of making money. Honestly, for what other reason can you, Americans, suppose that an artist would come? What inspiration do you think the country can offer him? What wings could he grow in so commercially bound a community? What delights for this soul could he find in that country? What have you to offer him

to equal the glorious memories of ancient Greece and Rome or of the Orient? There may be a handful of discerning people in each of your great cities, but they are swamped by the millions who applaud noise and violence, crude and sensual rhythms, false modesties, the cinemas, where robbery and rape are held up as examples to the younger generation, and a leering moralization that offers the child-woman with her honeyed smiles to the over-sophisticated playgoer.²³

America did not receive her with the adoration she was accustomed to, but she moved in high society there, just as she had in Paris. Her clipping book from her travel in the United States from 1917–1919 shows that she was performing in such vaunted venues as Carnegie Hall and the Schubert Theater.

The programs she performed were ever varied, many with meticulous program notes. During this season she was singing a program devoted to *Pierrot Lunaire*. Another program, titled *Les femmes et les hommes du passé et du présent* (Women and men of the past and present), was dedicated to Medieval songs such as *Belle Doette* and *La Nonne cloîtrée*. The second half of this program contained *Chansons des provinces de France* (Songs of the French Provinces), from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Still another program in her rotation was titled *Chansons des mes débuts, Le Chat Noir et Montmartre (Repertoire des gants noirs)* (With an introduction in English). She then divided these songs into three categories: Chansons types de Montmartre (*Le jeune homme triste, La Soularde*); Chansons types du Paris nocturne (*A la Villette, La Pierreuse, L'Apache*); and Chansons types du Quartier latin (*La complainte des quatre z-étudiants, L'hotel du numéro 3, T'en souviens-tu?*). She sang a program devoted to the Outlaws of France and America, one devoted to the Soldiers of France, and one to the life of Paul Verlaine. All, save the program about her *Débuts*, contain a very thoughtful grouping of historical French song, arranged by century, with a small number of the songs she was famous for, included to please her audience.

During this time, she had an idea of starting a school for singers in America. She started first at an informal venue at the Hotel Majestic in New York City; then later, having rented a large house on Fortieth Street with the assurances of a wealthy backer, was obliged to sell her home and furnishings in Paris when he reneged on his financial support. Her health was fragile, due to a problem with her kidneys, rumored to have been caused by the tightly corseted waist that was part of her signature look, and her reception from American audiences was dubious at best. She never regained the monetary or artistic success she enjoyed at the turn of the twentieth century. She had roles in seven films, both silent and spoken, and also wrote two novels and three autobiographies. Difficulties during both World Wars further affected her finances, and she was forced to sell correspondence and costumes to live. The Germans appropriated her apartment in Paris in

1941. She suffered a heart attack in 1942, and died in poverty two years later.

Yvette, not only through natural genius, but also by dint of relentless perseverance and work, the tenacity and minute exactness of which are staggering, succeeds in giving what looks like charm, like emotion, to the worthless songs of the café-concert. What wicked waste of art—but the artist is remarkable! Catulle Mendes.²⁴

Notes:

¹ Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1903), 119.

² Yvette Guilbert, *How to Sing a Song* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 511.

³ Ibid, 45.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 50.

⁶ Around \$250 per night in today's currency.

⁷ Guilbert, *How to Sing a Song*, 51.

⁸ Ibid, 178.

⁹ Ibid, 64.

¹⁰ Geraldine Power, "Yvette Guilbert: A Career of Public Applause and Personal Disappointment," *Context: Journal of Music Research*, no. 27/28 (2004): 31–41.

¹¹ Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music*, 122.

¹² Yvette Guilbert, *The Song of My Life: My Memories*, trans. Béatrice de Holthoer (London: Harrap and Co., 1929), 179.

¹³ Guilbert, *How to Sing a Song*, 220.

¹⁴ Ibid, 233.

¹⁵ Ibid, 248.

¹⁶ Ibid, 427.

¹⁷ Ibid, 843.

¹⁸ Ibid, 924.

¹⁹ Ibid, 1041.

²⁰ Ibid, 1257.

²¹ Ibid, 1312–1338.

²² Guilbert, *The Song of My Life*, 111.

²³ Ibid, 222.

²⁴ Ibid, 166.

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“To be in harmony with my soul” / Interview with Lenka Nota

KSJ: Lenka, your calling has always been vocal music and music for the stage, so it is not surprising that for the past year or so you have been working on your first opera. You chose as a subject the nineteenth-century Czech literary figure Božena Němcová. Why Božena?

LN: It's a long story, which began many years ago. Actually, it started at the time that the complete correspondence of Božena Němcová was published. Němcová is an extraordinary figure in the world of women's literature. Born in about 1820 (we do not know the exact year of her birth), she became the first woman writer and poet in the Czech language, was an important representative of the nineteenth-century National Revival, a dissident, and an example of a woman promoting gender equality naturally throughout and through her life. She was not a fighter for women's rights in a political sense but she lived a life that many women then and even today cannot imagine. She was a woman who was talented, sensitive, intelligent, brave, beautiful and totally independent in all connotations of the word. When we read her correspondence, some of the passages sound so contemporary or even shocking in some ways; that's how free and natural—and this is very important—she was in her mind, thoughts, and behavior. Božena Němcová wrote a book entitled *Babička* (Grandmother) which has been since translated into a hundred languages. Children learn about her at school but the way of presenting her colorful personality is limited and dry. My aim was to show Němcová as a human being, not only as a symbol of the National Revival. And thanks to this work, I was able to connect both my passions—to write for the human voice and on a theme relevant to women—which are essential to my creative work and also my major interests as a musicologist.

KSJ: Who wrote the libretto? When and where is it going to be staged?

LN: The libretto is based on the previously mentioned beautiful correspondence of Božena Němcová. She used a very specific, poetic language not only in her books but also in her private correspondence. The libretto was written by the renowned Czech documentary filmmaker Olga Sommerová who did a great documentary on Němcová entitled *Nesmrtelná hvězda Božena Němcová* (Immortal Star of Božena Němcová). This film made me even more determined to ensure that when I compose a work about Němcová, I am doing it the right way. Coincidentally, the documentary was also aired by Czech Television at the time when I started thinking about this topic. Following the broadcast, I was so impudent that I wrote an e-mail to Olga Sommerová, asking her whether she would consider writing a libretto for my opera. And, to my surprise, she agreed. For her, it was a new ex-

perience as well. She had never done a libretto before.

My chamber opera *Božena* is to be performed by the Opera Diversa Ensemble at the Reduta Theater in Brno this coming fall. I am very happy about it and hope that the audience, and maybe the school children too, will like it and will become interested in the legacy of Němcová's life and work.

KSJ: Your music is contemporary, yet unapologetically “accessible”, i.e., primarily tonal. How would you define your music yourself and what have been the sources of your inspiration?

LN: You are right. My music is tonal and, therefore, I would not call it contemporary in the usual way of understanding the term. I studied with Jarmila Mazourová and František Emmert and both of them were somewhat traditional but original composers nevertheless. That is why I did not learn the new techniques. I have to admit that sometimes I regret it. It is useful to have as much experience as possible, so that you have more choices. I am open to experiment but it has to be done in sync with the topic of the composition; it should be a good fit. When we experiment, the result should not be something superficially shocking; there should be a reason for using experimental language; it must have a meaning. As to the sources of my inspiration, they vary: women, world music, Moravian folklore, books, nature, a conversation with someone, art in general. To define my music is difficult. It is different. I love to compose for the stage, for the human voice, so my music may sound lyrical, emotional, theatrical. I dream about having more opportunities to compose for the theater and one day also for the screen.

KSJ: You have a longtime interest in composing women – your dissertation was on Galina Ustvolskaya, for example, written at a time when she was still a fairly unknown entity. You also programmed a radio series on women composers. Is it your own experience as a woman composer that led you to advocate for these women?

LN: Actually, I don't know. Ustvolskaya was a “coincidence.” I had heard her music many years ago in a concert and was so fascinated by it that later, when I was thinking about the subject for my dissertation, her name came to mind naturally. This seemed somewhat crazy at the time, following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, to write about a Russian author, let alone to travel voluntarily to Russia, when the borders to the West finally opened. I remained faithful to the theme of women because our lives are more complicated, more emotional, more connected with real life because we give life and by giving a new life we are so

close to death, too. There were many strong women in history. And yet, I can talk from my own experience, we are still not as free and equal in society as men are. When I went through my own divorce, for example, the arguments were in fact exactly (!) the same as those heard by Božena Němcová when she was divorcing 150 years ago. For me, freedom is not about showing my breast at the beach or using contraceptive pills but about having the same rights and opportunities and, most importantly, about being freed from the dilemma—whether to be a mother, or pursue a career. And by a career I mean earning my living by utilizing my talent and skills, by working in my profession. Not to be discriminated against on the basis of motherhood—to be able to be a mother and an artist at the same time. There is still so much to do in this area. I don't expect women to work in men's jobs or men to go on maternity leave and breastfeed their children. That's an extreme which has nothing to do with nature and is not in harmony with us, with our souls. My idea of equality is not quotas but a truly equal status of men and women in society based on an equal status of their contributions. Motherhood and childrearing should be recognized as the woman's two major contributions to society. There should also be the recognition that women too have the right to fulfill their creative potential and must have the same opportunities for their professional, creative, and spiritual development. We are not (and we don't want to be) men; all we want is to focus fully on our work and get the same financial recognition for it as men do.

KSJ: You have been living in Austria for the past ten years. What are the working opportunities for women composers there?

LN: From my point of view and experience, there are none. Since I did not study here and was not a part of this society for much of my life, I have practically no connections which are necessary in this world. The composers who are not famous—meaning internationally famous (and there are very few like that)—are practically starving. They can compose, their music might be even performed, but if someone asks for a new piece, there is an automatic assumption that you will do it for free. In a better case, you receive a very small honorarium, which is often less than pocket money. I have to pay, as a freelance composer and musicologist, very high social and health insurance, so practically what remains from my income—and this is not an income from composing—is not enough for me and my daughter to live on. We live from alimony right now and that forces me to depend on my ex-husband. For the past two years, I have been looking for a stable job. It is not easy for me because I am no longer that young, I am a foreigner from the East, a woman who lives alone with a child. For the employer, I am someone without perspective. And this leads us to the issue of women's rights again; the women in the employment



office have repeatedly told me, “You have no chances unless you marry a rich man.” Are we still stuck in the 19th century, when women had to secure their material life by marrying well? And what price do we pay for it, actually? Which has just made me realize that the women composers whose music I studied, the ones who somewhat succeeded in their professional life, had no children and in many cases were not even married. This is terrible. They had to decide between family life and their career; yet no man would have to make such a decision. It is the women who become penalized for having children. And that is also why many developed countries are in crisis now, as the women do not want to have children or postpone their chances for motherhood until it is too late.

KSJ: What do you think about Vienna's concert scene? And how would it compare to that of Prague or Brno?

LN: The artistic level of the concerts is very high in Vienna, although the repertoire is quite conservative—especially in institutions like the Wiener Staatsoper or the Musikverein. But there is a new intendant of the Wien Modern Festival, for instance, and the festival became very interesting in 2016, after many years of hopeless experimentation. And the Theater an der Wien is a very progressive opera house with many interesting, innovative productions. There are always so many things going on here and the people take it as a natural part of their lives to follow cultural events, to talk about them. I can't say much about Prague, but in Brno, there is a very good team in the Brno Philharmonic Orchestra which has a very special dramaturgy, modern and carefully chosen. The team in the

Lenka Nota: To be in harmony with my soul

Janáček Theater is also good and they try to play at least one contemporary opera per year. A lot has changed for good, and I am very happy about it. Unfortunately, the overall cultural policy of the Czech Republic is horrible—in fact, there is no cultural policy—and when you watch the politicians and the president, one might think that there is no culture at all. Only one percent of the whole state budget goes towards culture! This is such a shame. Our society can never call itself mature if it ignores culture, if it neglects the spiritual development of its people. That the culture remains alive is only thanks to all those fools who continue to work under undignified financial conditions and sometimes even with the contempt of society. Yet without accepting the needs of our soul, without beauty and without joy, without the catharsis which comes only through spirit, life has no sense and is degraded to bodily needs and material survival.

KSJ: What do you think about contemporary classical music – is it alive and well, or in crisis?

LN: Recently, I conducted interviews with many people involved in contemporary music. And I became an optimist. I think that the situation of contemporary music is well these days, compared to the situation twenty years ago. There were no ensembles specializing in contemporary music and very few festivals and concerts; contemporary music was not part of a regular concert program. This has changed. Another thing is that there are now many good musicians who are keenly interested in playing contemporary music; they play it well and with eagerness. This is very good. We live now and we should live with the art of our time, since it always reflects what is going on around us. That's why the artists are often hysterical and unbearable, because artists are sensors of a society and their sensitivity and mental insight get reflected in their art. If there's a crisis in music, it only reflects the crisis of the society we live in—egoistic, materialistic, inconsiderate, without hope. But under this surface, there are also many good things going on and that's positive.

KSJ: Lenka, thanks so much for sharing your thoughts and insights with us.

Dr. Lenka Nota is Czech composer and musicologist living in Vienna. She studied theatrology and musicology at the Masaryk University and composition at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno, Czech Republic. She currently works for Universal Edition and as a freelance radio programmer and journalist. Nota's music has been released on compact discs by Lotos Records and by Czech Radio. Her first opera *Božena* will be premiered this fall, in her hometown of Brno.



Christine Fischer, ed. *Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940). Zeitbilder, Lebensbilder, Klangbilder*. Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2017. Proceedings from the symposium *Vítězslava Kaprálová in ihrer und unserer Zeit – zu Einfluss und Rezeption ihres Schaffens*, organized by ForumMusikDiversität on 27–28 November 2015 in Basel. Contributors: Nicolas Dorny, Christina Fischer, Karla Hartl, Daniel Lienhard, Judith Mabary, Olga Pavlů, Alice Rajnohová, Thomas Svatos, Miloš Štědroň. Die in einer Brünner MusikerInnenfamilie aufgewachsene Kaprálová eroberte sich in ihrem kurzen Leben mit Studien in Prag und Paris einen weiten Wirkungskreis – davon zeugt nicht zuletzt ihr OEuvre von 25 Opera und über dreissig Werken ohne Opuszahl. Wie viele ihrer ZeitgenossInnen entwickelte und perfektionierte die Komponistin ihre musikalische Kreativität in einem Umfeld von politischen Repressionen und Krieg. Zudem blieb die Rezeption ihres Lebens und Schaffens in Tschechien lange von einer weiteren Diktatur überschrieben. Dank den Anstrengungen der kanadischen Kapralova-Society ist die Komponistin dennoch seit der Jahrtausendwende stärker ins Blickfeld des Musiklebens gerückt. Doch bleiben zahlreiche Fragen zum Kontext ihres Schaffens und dazu, wie sie selbst ihre Musik ästhetisch bewertete, offen. PraktikerInnen und WissenschaftlerInnen aus Tschechien, Kanada, den USA und der Schweiz suchen in ihren Beiträgen nach Antworten auf diese Fragen, die Rezeptionsgrenzen weiten und Nationengrenzen überwinden helfen.

New recordings and publications



KAPRÁLOVÁ: COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC. *Sonata Appassionata. Three Piano Pieces: I. Praeludium. II. Crab Canon. Grotesque Passacaglia. Five Piano Compositions. Dubnová preludia (April Preludes). Variations sur le Carillon de l'Église St-Étienne-du-Mont. Dance for Piano (reconstructed: Koukl). Dvě kytičky (2 Bouquets). Písnička (Little Song). Ostinato Fox. Slavnostní Fanfára (Festive Fanfare) / Giorgio Koukl, pianist / Grand Piano GP708.*

Here is something different under the sun: the complete piano music of the little-known and short-lived Czech composer–conductor Vítězslava Kaprálová. She was born in 1915, her musical abilities recognized early, and was already composing fully mature compositions at the age of sixteen. It is a good thing, too, because she died at age 25. She had a good pedigree, having studied composition under Vítězslav Novak and conducting under the great Václav Talich.

Judging from this recording, her harmonic language was essentially tonal but included many “sideways” key changes and unusual chord positions. The opening selection, the *Sonata Appassionata*, was written in 1933 when she was only eighteen. It is unusual for being in only two movements, the second of which is a theme and variations. The muscular first movement, marked “Maestoso – Appassionato,” fits well into the work’s title, while the second is surprisingly lyrical, showing a good sense of invention but not particularly passionate. To my ears, this sonata has more the sound of a piano reduction of an orchestral work. I wonder if she was already thinking orchestrally while writing it. The last variation, marked “Vivo,” is by far the most interesting, progressing in a manner very similar

to some of the harmonically unusual works of Charles-Valentin Alkan. It is also the one variant with the most counterpoint, showing how well she was absorbing her lessons.

The *Praeludium* of 1935 is rather denser harmonically, still tonal but occasionally ambiguous and utilizing many tone clusters and rolling, descending chromatic figures, sometimes with the two hands playing close seconds or other clashing harmonies. It may best be described as a jollier version of Max Reger’s music. I was even more taken by the *Crab Canon* from the same year, with its measured “crawl” up and down the keyboard, again often chromatically. Also very interesting is the *Grotesque Passacaglia* from the same year, a truly startling and original work, sounding much more like something written in the late 1940s or early 1950s than in 1935. The music continually shifts patterns, both rhythmic and harmonic, in such a way that the listener is tossed around a bit like a rag doll in a box trying to follow it.

Kaprálová’s *Five Piano Compositions* date from 1931, when she was only sixteen years old. You would never guess she was so young at the time, so imaginative and structurally sound is her musical expression. Already at this young age, she was moving along chromatic lines, e.g., in the second piece (“Andante”) which combines tender lyricism with surprising chord shifts. Occasionally, as in the “Tempo di Menuetto,” we hear Kaprálová “thinking as she writes,” using little *luftpausen* to interrupt the flow so that both she and the listener can absorb what is going on. The final section, “Alla marcia funebre,” has a surprisingly Russian sound about it, much like mid-period Scriabin.

I have had occasion to review, and praise, the work of pianist Giorgio Koukl in other music, but the highest honor I can give him is that he focuses the listener’s attention on what the music has to say. This does not mean that he plays in a placid, straightforward manner with no feeling or dynamics—on the contrary, his playing is incredibly passionate—only that it matches the mood of the music so well that you remain riveted to what Kaprálová is saying in the music. That is the mark of a great interpreter, to make you hear the *music* and what it is saying without imposing a quirky interpretation on top of it.

There is indeed some growth to be heard in her later works, particularly the *April Preludes* of 1937.

New recordings and publications

Here the daring harmonic experiments of her earlier music are used in a commanding manner; she is absolutely sure of what she is saying and how to say it, and thus can “speak” eloquently through the keyboard. Despite its title, there is very little music here that one would mentally associate with April or springtime as such, save for the third prelude (“Andante semplice”). The fourth and last prelude is set to a lively dance tempo, but the continual harmonic movement keeps moving it slightly away from the listener, and the later section, in which the tempo is greatly reduced, forces one to listen to the now-darker chords being used.

Short as it is—only eight minutes total—the *Variations on the Bells of the Church of St. Etienne* from 1938 displays an even greater command of compositional style. Kaprálová was quite obviously moving towards a compact style in which a few gestures said as much as her more effusive statements of just a few years earlier.

Some of the later pieces on this CD (the *Two Bouquets*, *Písnička*, *Ostinato Fox* and *Festive Fanfare*) are world premiere recordings, and except for the latter—a 19-second work that, though well crafted, comes and goes too quickly—they add to her small but meaty output.

All in all, this is a thoroughly fascinating disc and a great introduction to a composer who definitely deserves to be better known.

Lynn René Bayley, artmusiclounge.wordpress.com



Bengt Forsberg. Neglected Works for Piano. dB Productions Sweden DBCD170 (2016). Piano music by women composers Vítězlava Kaprálová, Amy Beach, Doreen Carwithen, Valborg Aulin, Ruth Almén, Grazyna Bacewicz, Germaine Tailleferre, and Ruth Crawford Seeger.

ALMEN: Sonata in B minor, op. 2
 AULIN, V: Feuille d'Album; Valse elegiaque
 BACEWICZ: Sonatina
 BEACH, A: Scottish Legend, op. 54, no. 1
 CARWITHEN: Sonatina
 CRAWFORD SEEGER: Preludes for Piano: No. 6 'Andante Mystico'
 KAPRALOVA: April Preludes, op. 13
 TAILLEFERRE: Pastorales

“Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Ravel and the like are creators of eternal masterpieces, works so great they tend to overshadow everything else. It’s easy to forget that around these giants there are many, many wonderful composers, who simply must be discovered. You only need the curiosity and imagination to find them! Only in recent times have women been able to claim their rightful position as artistic equals. Some of the composers on this album have been left to oblivion and many people believe—sadly!—that forgotten composers deserve it—to stay forgotten. When I’ve told people about this project, some have assumed it would be an act of political correctness. But to me, this is purely a collection of good and interesting music. And, hopefully, to you as well.”
 Bengt Forsberg

Bengt Forsberg (born 1952) is a Swedish concert pianist most famous for his numerous collaborations with the mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter. He participated in her project to record songs written in the concentration camp of Terezín. Forsberg has a reputation as a champion of neglected music and composers. He is highly acclaimed as a recital accompanist and regularly plays alongside Mats Lidström and Nils-Erik Sparf.

VÍTĚZSLAVA KAPRÁLOVÁ



DOPISY LÁSKÁM

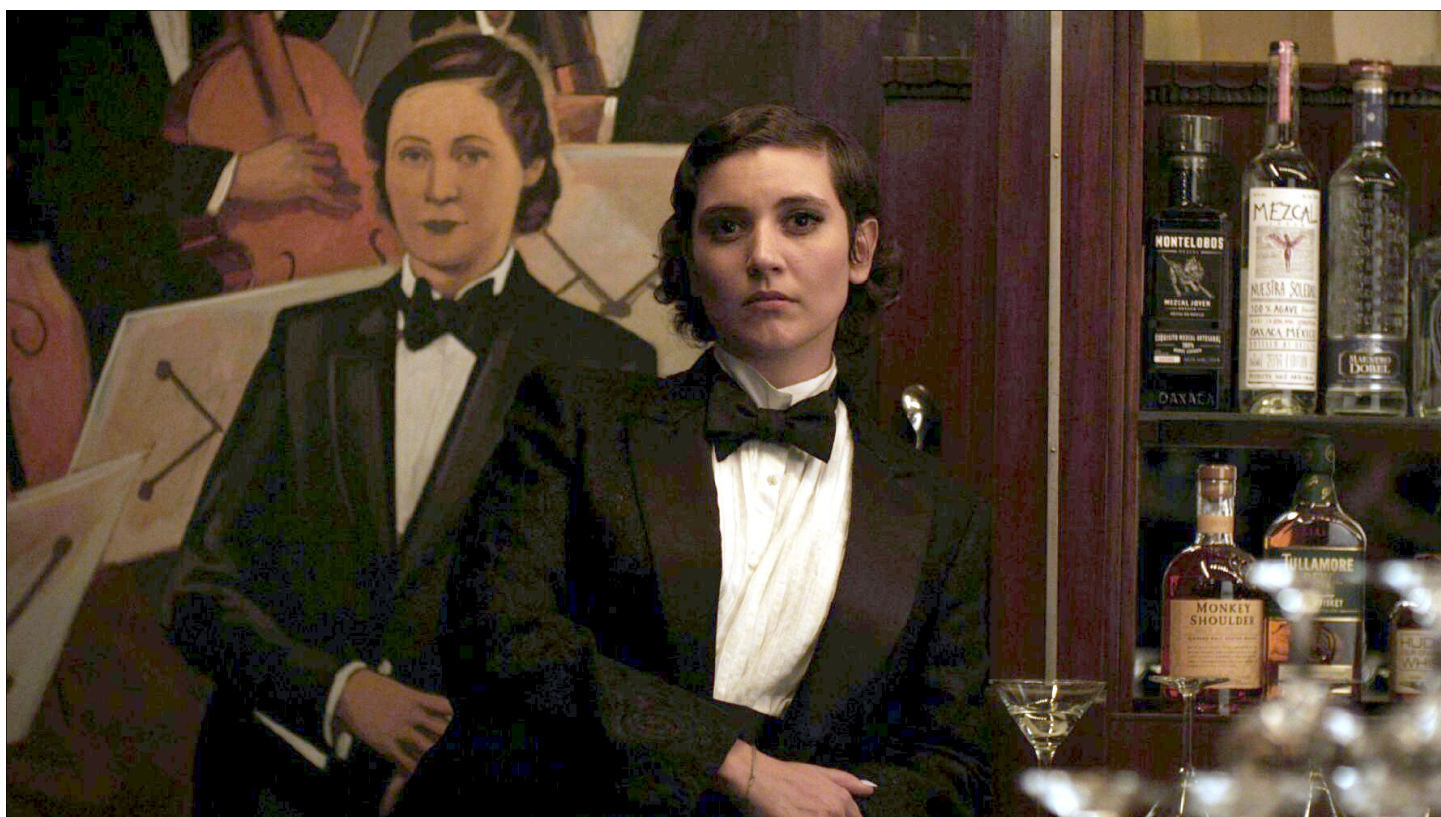
Vítězlava Kaprálová: Dopisy láskám. Korespondence z let 1938–1940. (Letters to Loves. Correspondence from 1938–1940.) Toronto: The Kapralova Society, 2016. ISBN 978-0-9940425-2-1. Volume 2 of the collected correspondence.

New recordings and publications

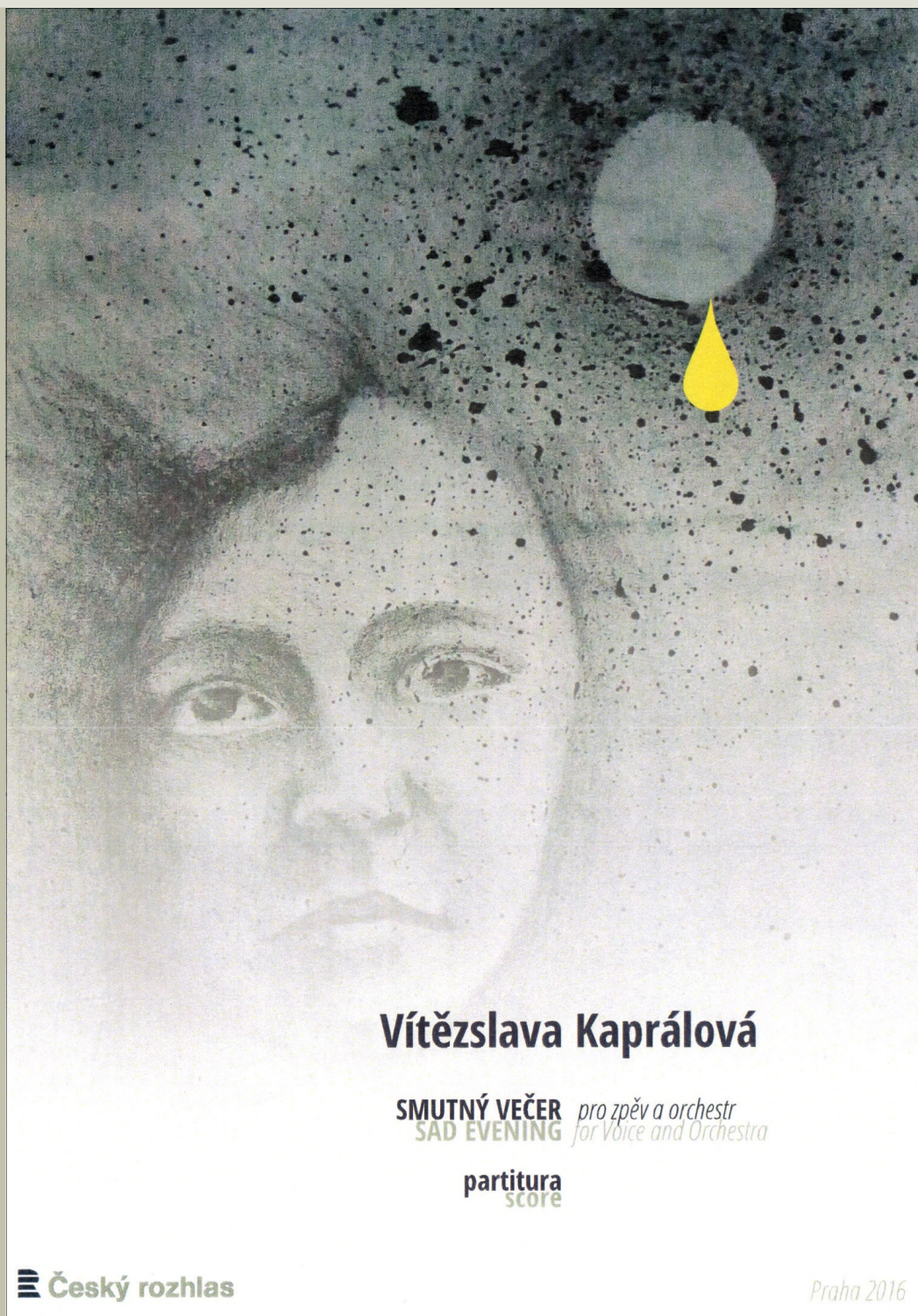
MOZART IN THE JUNGLE 3 Soundtrack. Sony Classical, December 2016. Featuring Plácido Domingo, Joshua Bell, Yo-Yo-Ma, Ana Mara Martinez.

MOZART IN THE JUNGLE is a half-hour comedic drama series based on the critically acclaimed memoir 'Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs & Classical Music,' by Blair Tindall. The award-winning television series produced by Amazon draws back the curtain on the world of music, where artistic dedication and creativity collide with mind games, politicking and survival instincts. Kaprálová appears in two of the ten episodes of Season 3 (episodes 6 and 9) as a trailblazer character from the past who inspires the heroine of the series, Hailey (Lola Kirke), and her friend Lizzie (Hannah Dunne) to take on new creative challenges. The series also features Kaprálová's song Novoroční and samples her Piano Concerto.

While the soundtrack album does not feature a single composition by Kaprálová, one of the original works on the album (track 4) is performed by an orchestra named after the composer – The Kaprálová Orchestra. The soloist is Joshua Bell.



Kaprálková (in the background) making her debut in Amazon's television series *Mozart in the Jungle*, Season 3, Episode 6. Kaprálová obsessed Lizzy (Hannah Dunne, in the forefront), is one of the series' main female characters. Photo: IMDb (2016).



Vítězslava Kaprálová

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