

Kaprálová's Piano Concerto in D Minor, op. 7

Karla Hartl

The Czech Radio's label Radioservis has recently added to its catalog a unique recording—Kaprálová's Piano Concerto in D Minor, op. 7.¹ The CD also features Kaprálová's Sonata Appassionata, Variations sur le Carillon de l'église St-Etienne du Mont (—the latter work once charmed Kaprálová's friend Bohuslav Martinů so much that he arranged to have it published with La Sirène éditions musicales in 1938 in Paris), and the Three Piano Pieces (with its unconventionally conceived passacaglia that once amused another mentor of Kaprálová—Vítězslav Novák).

The brief but intense life of Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940), set between the two world wars, ran a close parallel with that of the First Czechoslovak Republic,² to whose modernist movement Kaprálová belonged. The composer's creative development began in her hometown of Brno—a major musical centre of the new republic, second only to Prague—and was stimulated by the cultured environment of her family and its circle of friends—composer Theodor Schaefer and musicologists Vladimír Helfert, Ludvík Kundera, and Gracian Černušák. A further stimulus came with Kaprálová's move to Prague (and her studies under Novák and Václav Talich at the Prague Conservatory plus her involvement in the Presence society for contemporary music, founded by avant-garde composer Alois Hába); and eventually to Paris, where Kaprálová relocated in 1937 to advance her education at the Ecole normale. In Paris she also found her mentor (and soulmate) in Bohuslav Martinů. His often cited influence on Kaprálová's musical development has been rather overestimated, however, for the music of Igor Stravinsky and her father in particular exerted as strong an influence on Kaprálová.

Like her father, Kaprálová was drawn to piano as her natural instrument, and piano compositions are well represented in her relatively large output that includes about fifty compositions. Piano also played a crucial role in her music as a compositional tool with which she experimented in both smaller and larger forms. It is therefore not surprising that the most original and most sophisticated works in her catalog are those for piano: from the *Sonata Appassionata* and piano concerto to *April Preludes* and *Variations sur le Carillon* (and the Martinů-influenced neoclassical Partita in which the piano also plays an important percussive role).

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in D Minor is Kaprálová's first orchestral composition and a final fruit of her studies at the Brno Conservatory where she enrolled in 1930 as a girl barely fifteen years old. She was the first female student in the history of the Conservatory to be accepted into a double major program of composition and conducting. During her initial year at the Conservatory she composed an accomplished first opus—a cycle of five impressionistic pieces for solo piano. The following year she wrote two works for violin and piano; and in her third year she composed *January*, a remarkable song for soprano / tenor, flute, two violins, cello and piano, and *Sonata Appassionata*, the first of her four major works for solo piano. The sonata prepared her well for the

work on the concerto, particularly its first movement, whose musical ideas Kaprálová formulated at the beginning of the fourth year of her studies in Brno.

While the solo piano part did not present any problem for Kaprálová, the orchestral writing was an entirely new challenge, although she did have some experience with orchestra as a student of conducting. It is also possible that, in addition to consulting with her teachers at the Conservatory, she discussed the concerto's instrumentation with Theodor Schaefer, a friend and mentor who was known to have a great deal of expertise in this area. (She could not turn to her father, since Kaprál had about the same experience with orchestration as his daughter. He was, after all, primarily a composer of piano music and songs, and composed only one work for large orchestra—a small scale wedding march).

The first movement of the three-movement concerto (*Allegro entusiastico – Largo – Allegro*) is still grounded in the romantic idiom. The second movement, unusually short and dominated by a simple melancholy melody, is in contrapuntal style. The last, rondo movement, however, already anticipates a new creative period which was to blossom under the guidance of Novák. The composition convincingly displays the versatility of Kaprálová's musical talent, with its typical energy and passion, lyricism, intelligent humor, spontaneity, but also discipline.

Kaprálová officially graduated from the Brno Conservatory with her performance of the concerto's first (and longest) movement, which more than amply demonstrated that she was able to meet the formal and technical requirements posed on a conservatory graduate. The performance, at which Kaprálová also appeared for the first time before the public as conductor, took place at the 3rd graduation concert of the Brno Conservatory on June 17, 1935. The soloist was one of her teachers and close family friends, Ludvík Kundera, who, according to a contemporary critic, "advocated for the work with the full weight of his mature art and refined aesthetics."³ The reviewer for *Lidové noviny*, Gracian Černušák, was also impressed by the composer's "confidence and surety with which she controlled such a complex orchestral apparatus, as well as with her wonderful sense of orchestral color and the technical mastery of the solo part and orchestral tutti in their interactions. The work's fluent diction serves the elegant

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invention with such ease that the piece rises considerably above the average level of works of this kind.”⁴ In *Moravské noviny* another reviewer praised the young conductor’s performance: “Her piano concerto emanates youthful energy and enthusiasm, and is, judging from the first movement that was performed at the concert, a well-constructed and skillfully orchestrated composition. Also as a conductor, V. Kaprálová guided the orchestra in this work, which is in all respects demanding, with admirable composure, energy, and strong sense of purpose, and contributed with a nice gesture to an overall positive impression of her composition.”⁵ A review of the performance was also published by *Prager Tagblatt*, a German language newspaper based in Prague, in which the reviewer underscored as particularly regrettable that the presenter showcased only the first movement of the work; however, even its fragment revealed a remarkable musical talent: “Es ist zu bedauern, dass die Veranstalter nur den ersten Satz des Werkes aufführen liessen, doch auch diese kleine Probe zeigt eine erstaunlich temperamentvolle musikalische Begabung.”⁶

The success of the premiere of her first important orchestral work must have been particularly gratifying for Kaprálová, especially after the rather taxing preparations taking place only four days before the concert, that she had described to her close friend Otto Wach: “Please think of me on Monday and keep your fingers crossed. I have a concert and must now spend hours every day at rehearsals which were delayed till the last minute.”⁷ And a letter she received on the very day of the graduation evening must have also meant much to her. It was from a close family friend, the musicologist Vladimír Helfert, who was the first to recognize in Kaprálová a talent to be reckoned with and who did not hesitate to have her name represent the most promising youngest composer generation in his influential study of modern Czech music, published a year later.⁸ Helfert opens his letter (Fig. 1) with this wonderful encouragement: “Today is a day particularly significant for your entire life. You are meeting the public as a mature, accomplished artist, as well as a professional interpreter. I will be with you in my thoughts,”⁹ and he continues, “I recall how it all began. I still have one of your childhood compositions—your waltz. I was already intrigued then by the freshness and wealth of your ideas. And so I began to watch you to see, at least from the distance, what fills your soul, how it lights up with the divine spark of music—that wonderful blessing that is given only to people as the greatest gift. And again and again I saw a new expression of your so young yet already delightful talent. And now—you are graduating! Just think about it: from a waltz to a concerto! How much life, how much of an inner, beautiful development is in it. How much your soul grew in those years, how rich it has become!”¹⁰

The full concerto was premiered by the Brno Radio Orchestra about a year later, on October 15, 1936, in a broadcast of the Brno Radiojournal. Ludvík Kundera played again

the solo piano part, and the orchestra was again conducted by Kaprálová. Several more performances of the work followed, and after the war it was even recorded for the Czech Radio (featuring Berta Rixová-Kabeláčová and the conductor Karel Ančerl, the future music director of the Toronto Symphony), but the recording did not survive, and a few years later the work disappeared altogether from the orchestral repertoire.

By then Kaprálová’s life, the mere twenty-five years of it, was over for more than a decade. Yet even in the short time allotted to her she was able to fulfill the mission that Helfert once prompted her to follow: “And you must always pursue the ideal of truth and artistic profundity. To be honest in your art! These are the very internal struggles, without which one cannot live a rich inner life ... to soldier on, not to give in to temptation, to be faithful to the ideals of beauty and truth. This often requires sacrifice and great courage. Without them, however, there is not great art. For this journey, I wish you, on this day, a lot of mental strength for the rest of your life!”¹¹

Notes:

This article is an English translation of my text “Unikátní Vítězslava Kaprálová,” published in *Týdeník Rozhlas* 50 (December 2011): 16–17.

1. *Vítězslava Kaprálová*. Alice Rajnohová, Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra, Tomáš Hanus. Recorded November 2010 and June 2011. Radioservis CRO577-2 (2011). Includes *Piano Concerto in D Minor*, op. 7, *Three Piano Pieces*, op. 9, *Variations sur le Carillon de l’église St-Étienne du Mont*, op. 16, and *Sonata Appassionata*, op. 6.
2. Founded in 1918, the republic ceased to exist in 1938, with the annexation of the Sudetenlands by Hitler.
3. Gracian Černušák, “Brněnská konservatoř,” *Lidové noviny*, June 20, 1935, 9.
4. Ibid.
5. “Absolventský koncert konservatoře,” signed by initials -mf-, *Moravské noviny*, June 18, 1935, 4.
6. “Konzerte,” *Prager Tagblatt*, signed by initials W.H., June 20, 1935, 6.
7. Vítězslava Kaprálová to Otto Wach, 13 June 1935. The Kapralova Society Archive.
8. Vladimír Helfert, *Česká moderní hudba* (Olomouc: nakl. Index, 1936).
9. Vladimír Helfert to Vítězslava Kaprálová. Brno, 17 June 1935. The Kapralova Society Archive.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

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