

1 A Bohemian in Paris, Dada, Film, and All that Jazz: The Innovative Operas of Bohuslav Martinů and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes*

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“IRONIC: It’s the male and female game.

ONANE: Is that what you call love, then?

EQUINOX: It’s not love.

It’s more a game of taking or being taken.”

G. Ribemont-Dessaignes, *The Emperor of China*, 1916¹

1.1. Introduction

The Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů was one of those seeking to establish a new classical language in music in the 1920s, particularly in music for the stage. An essential initial impetus was given to this process by the operas he wrote in France to libretti by the French writer Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, whose ism, admiration

* This chapter draws on some material from the following article, principally on Martinů’s *Les Trois Souhais*: Geoffrey CHEW, “Martinů’s Three Wishes and Their Fulfilment: Links between Paris and Prague in Music of the 1920s”, *French Cultural Studies* 11 (2000), 367–76, but has been thoroughly revised and expanded. As in that article and in another (unpublished) paper of my own, “The Soliloquies of Drunken Pianists: A Comparison of the Film Sequences in Martinů’s *Les Trois Souhais* and Weill’s *Royal Palace*”, also drawn on here, I wish to thank the Bohuslav Martinů Centre (Centrum Bohuslava Martinů) in Polička, the Bohuslav Martinů Foundation (Nadace Bohuslava Martinů) in Prague, and the Kurt Weill Foundation, New York, for making unpublished material in their respective holdings available to me. Special thanks are due to Aleš Březina, Zoja Seyčková, and Michael Crump for providing access to Martinů sources and other primary materials, and to Robert Vilain and James Helgeson for useful comments.

¹ Georges RIBEMONT-DESSAIGNES, *L’Empereur de Chine / Le Serin muet*, published as if in a “fourth edition” (Paris: Au sans pareil, 1921), 17: “Ironique : C’est le jeu du mâle et de la femelle. Onane : Est-ce ainsi que vous nommez l’amour ? Equinoxe : Il ne s’agit pas d’amour, Mais du jeu qui consiste à prendre ou à être pris.” Translation here from Christopher BUTTERFIELD, in RIBEMONT-DESSAIGNES, *The Emperor of China, The Mute Canary, & The Executioner of Peru* (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2015), 13. Translations of subsequent quotations from Ribemont-Dessaignes are mine.

for the Marquis de Sade, and experimentation with film endow these works with very distinctive features. More broadly, Martinů's collaboration with Ribemont-Dessaignes also represents a key stage in the development of Czech music in the interwar period, because Ribemont-Dessaignes himself constituted an active link between Paris and leading avant-gardists in Prague for several years.

Yet these operas of Martinů's are still surprisingly poorly known in detail, and this is due to several facts. They remained unperformed at the time; the initial enthusiasm of the Prague avant-garde for Ribemont-Dessaignes and his ideas seems to have cooled off after a few years; the composer, and others, appear deliberately to have drawn a veil over them in the years of the Second World War; and discussion of Ribemont-Dessaignes himself is quite sparse. A detailed consideration of the operas that represented this collaboration therefore may seem particularly useful.

1.2. 'Objectivity' and 'Dynamism' as Key Factors in Martinů's Early Stage Music

Soon after Martinů arrived in Paris as a student in 1923, seeking, in his own words, "the true roots of European civilization", he wrote an enthusiastic short article on Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (1910–11), for a Czech readership, outlining some of the essential elements in Stravinsky's work, which were generated, he thought, by the two fundamental principles of "objectivity" ("objektivnost") and "dynamism" ("dynamismus"). For him, Stravinsky's music stood in stark contrast to the pre-war background against which it appeared, of international 'Romanticism and Impressionism,' represented by Debussy, Richard Strauss, and Skryabin, at a time when he thought that even the works of Janáček and Josef Suk had not yet been generally accepted in Bohemia and Moravia.²

It would have been obvious that Stravinsky and his Parisian ballet music would appeal to Martinů. Well before he left for Paris, Martinů was already known in Prague as a chic modernist prepared to flout established taste by importing the primitive and the trivial into his music. In 1919 in a review of his ballet *Stín* (*The Shadow*, H102, 1916), Otakar Ostrčil, composer and conductor, had refused to recommend the work for performance at the National Theatre in Prague. Ostrčil found Martinů's "modern, or rather vogueish" ("moderní, či spíše módní") style to be informed by an unmotivated primitivism; he also criticized the orchestration as being "simple and crude, with undue use of piano and celesta [...]. The sound of the piano gives an orchestral piece the unduly trivial sound of a café band."³ The positive incorporation of allusions to the primitive and the trivial represents a central difference between the pre-war 'Viennese' Prague modernism of Ostrčil, among others, and the post-war

² Bohuslav MARTINŮ, "Stravinského Petruška", *Národní a Stavovské divadlo* 2/8 (17 October 1924), reprinted in Miloš ŠAFRÁNEK, ed., *Divadlo Bohuslava Martinů* (Prague: Editio Supraphon, 1979), 152–53. The composer's representation of 1920s Czechoslovakia as reactionary overemphasises the importance of the (admittedly powerful) conservative establishment as against the activities of the interwar avant-garde, some of which are exemplified in this article. Cf. the account of the scene in Czechoslovakia and Martinů's attitude to it offered in Ivana RENTSCH, *Anklänge an die Avantgarde: Bohuslav Martinůs Opern der Zwischenkriegszeit* [= Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, 61] (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007), especially 7–23.

³ Untitled review (2 December 1919); reprinted in ŠAFRÁNEK, *Divadlo Bohuslava Martinů*, 119: "Orchestrace je jednoduchá a neumělá s nadměrným užíváním klavíru a celesty [...]. Zvuk klavíru dodával by orchestrální větě nesporně triviální zvuk kavárenského šramlu."



Fig. 1. Bohuslav Martinů, 1929

'Parisian' Prague modernism, as represented since 1910 by Stravinsky, with the seeming primitivism of *Le Sacre du printemps* (1911–13) or *Les Noces* (1921–23), and the allusions to jazz in the *Piano Rag Music* (1919), placed in the service principally of the ballet.⁴

In fact though, for Martinů, Stravinsky and his music appear not to have offered particular models for direct imitation so much as a general licence for eclecticism. He too draws on a range of heterogeneous models, capable of being contrasted in a panorama of well-defined forms. Such forms appear to have offered him the 'objectivity' he admired in Stravinsky, and the dance forms he chiefly chose—very largely modern, popular dance forms—seem to represent the 'dynamism' he saw in the Russian composer. On both counts, the ballet was an appropriate choice of medium, offering as it did eclectic opportunities for grotesqueries of various types, by no means all derived from Stravinsky. Thus the *dramatis personae* in *Koleda* (*A Carol*, H112) of 1917, of which only the libretto survives, are the comic peasants of Czech Baroque Christmas

plays and pastorellas, those of *Kdo je na světě nejmocnější?* (*Who is the Most Powerful in the World?* H133, 1922) are mice, and those of the well-known *Revue de cuisine* (*Kitchen Revue*, *Kuchyňská revue*, H161, 1927) are kitchen utensils. The taste for the grotesque was to persist in the operas discussed in this chapter.

But opera still seemed generally problematic to him at this point, as is clear from remarks he made on his ballet *Istar* (H130) in 1924. Here he argues that it is only abstract music which is capable of regeneration following "modern principles":

[The new problems of dramatic art] are a topical question, proceeding from a kind of stagnation in opera, or rather music drama, which is now [...] in a cul-de-sac. It is also the result of the new direction in contemporary music, which is manifested in *absolute music*. Naturally, this has led to the renewal of the ballet [...]. It is self-evident that the restoration of the ballet genre has been founded on new, modern principles [...]. [And] the works which signify

⁴ As used in this chapter, the term 'jazz' lays no claim to historical accuracy, but corresponds roughly to the usage of the period in referring to the rather heterogeneous popular styles current during the 1920s in Europe (including both Paris and Prague) that drew on genres and performing styles then fashionably thought to evoke 'American' and/or 'black' popular music.

the regeneration of the ballet are in the first place the works of Stravinsky: *The Firebird*, *Mavra* and, principally, *Petrushka* [...]. When I embarked in 1918 on the composition of *Istar*, I had not yet become aware of the new currents, which I have learnt for the first time this year in Paris.⁵

In fact a potential model for modern opera had already been provided by Stravinsky in one of the works mentioned by Martinů, namely *Mavra* (*The Moorish Girl*) (1921–22), and another was soon to be added in *Oedipus Rex* (1926–27).⁶ But Martinů's first opera, *Voják a tanečnice* (*The Soldier and the Dancer*, H162, also 1926–27), followed the (somewhat academic) ideas of its librettist, "J. L. Budín", a pseudonym for the Prague lawyer Jan Löwenbach, on what a viable modern version of comic opera should be. These ideas were published subsequently in 1928.⁷ The path followed by Wagner and Strauss was, according to Löwenbach, no longer viable; nor was the modern path of the "Literaturoper", through which composers set dramas that had never originally been envisaged as music theatre. Instead, a renewal of opera buffa was required, allowing more freedom than was possible in serious opera, in which the action should be unimportant, and the music should be lively, governed more by rhythm and movement than by lyricism. (Löwenbach put some pressure on Martinů to write a parallel article himself. The composer resisted doing so, however, and indeed resisted a number of Löwenbach's ideas, most notably including the ban on composing operas to pre-existing texts.) Löwenbach's libretto reinterprets Plautus's comedy *Pseudolus*, in a way allowing scope for Martinů's characteristic grotesquerie with a baffling variety of characters including sun, moon, statues, knives, forks, and so on. In a letter to Martinů he drew attention to a "fundamental innovation" for which he was responsible: his pairing of all the main characters with analogous figures from Ancient Greek and Latin comedy, the *commedia dell'arte*, and Molière.⁸

⁵ Bohuslav MARTINŮ, "Istar (K čtvrtéční premiéře na Národním divadle)", *Tribuna* (10 September 1924); reprinted in ŠAFRÁNEK, *Divadlo Bohuslava Martinů*, 136–37: "[Nové problémy a pokusy umění scénického jsou] otázkou aktuální, vycházející z jakési stagnace formy operní, vlastně hudebního dramatu, které [...] dostalo do slepé uličky. Je to též důsledek nového směru současné hudby, která se váže na projev *hudby absolutní*. Přirozeně, že došlo znovu k obnovení formy baletu [...]. Je samozřejmo, že restaurování formy baletní bylo založeno na zásadách nových, moderních [...]. Díla, která znamenají obrodu baletu, jsou v první řadě díla I. Stravinského: Ohnivý pták, *Mavra* a hlavně *Petruška* [...]. Když jsem přistoupil v roce 1918 ke kompozici *Istar*, neměl jsem dosud vědomostí o nových proudech, které jsem poznal teprve letos v Paříži." Further articles and other documents on *Istar* and its relationship to trends current at the time are also reprinted in ŠAFRÁNEK, *Divadlo Bohuslava Martinů*, 137–46.

⁶ As Richard Taruskin points out, Stravinsky's brief comic one-acter *Mavra* is also a series of disconnected numbers: "*Mavra* is in effect a skit grown up around, enclosing, and as it were rationalizing a musical medley, not an 'organically' motivated musical drama." See his *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions, 2: A Biography of the Works through Mavra* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 1549.

⁷ *Listy Hudební matice - Tempo 7* (1927/28), 248ff, reprinted in ŠAFRÁNEK, *Divadlo Bohuslava Martinů*, 165–67. Cf. the earlier article on music by his brother Josef, rejecting the 'pseudopathos' of Romantic music in the modern age: Josef LÖWENBACH, "Odpoutaná hudba", *Pásmo 2/1* (October 1925), reprinted in Štěpán VLAŠÍN et al., eds., *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, 2 (Prague: Svoboda, 1972), 154–59.

⁸ Unpublished letter from Jan Löwenbach in Prague to Martinů in Paris, 7 July 1926, at the Bohuslav Martinů Centre, Polička: "Základní novinka, kterou Vám navrhuji je tato: Každá