

Bohuslav Martinů*

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This is not intended to be a biography of Bohuslav Martinů but rather something about his personality, as I got to know him and as others knew him, too.

The life work of Bohuslav Martinů is enormous, and by now belongs to the entire world – operas, symphonies, songs, chamber music, solo compositions, piano works, and ensembles of great originality. It will take a long time before the music-loving public knows all of it. Martinů's name properly belongs among the greatest musical geniuses of all time. If you had known the author of this enormously rich legacy, you would have been amazed. He did not look the part at all. Tall, slim, smiling, quiet, and modest, – sometimes you could hardly get a word out of him – his innocent-looking, long face with its high forehead topped by a crown of blond hair that somehow looked as if it had never been combed – when, in fact, his stormy soul was full of wild rhythms and daring syncopes, original polyphonies and witty transitions. Perhaps you would feel close to him, to his quiet individuality, when suddenly an original passage in his music had so a deep human touch that it powerfully gripped your heart.

And that is just it – that deeply human strain in Martinů's music is what is so typically Czech about him. He was born in 1890 in a part of the country which combines many elements of Czech folklore – on the border between Bohemia and Moravia, in the highlands which gave us Smetana and many other great men of Czech culture and art. And to top the romantic environment, he was born in the bell tower of the church in the little town of Polička, which had long been known for its understanding of music and music-making. His parents were plain and simple folk, and little Bohoušek had to be his own teacher. As soon as he was able to hold a fiddle under his chin, he began to play, and

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from the church spire the tones of his first improvisations rang out into the neighboring woods and into the souls of his listeners down below.

From his early childhood he performed on the violin and played his own compositions. Soon, there were good people who helped him to get to the music conservatory in Prague. This was a terrific experience for Martinů – not so much the conservatory as the city of Prague itself, with its rush, its music, theatre, opera. At the conservatory, he did not do well; he disliked the stiff, classical method of teaching. The misunderstanding was mutual and soon he ended the agony – a great disappointment for his family – and concentrated only upon his own composing. It was a great help for him later in establishing himself that he was accepted as a violinist in the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra, where he had a unique opportunity to become acquainted with a great conductor who gave him sympathetic understanding – Talich.

Martinů himself always emphasized that he had formed his own musical personality by teaching himself, with the help of his native highlands and his violin playing. These three elements never left him afterwards, not even after he got to Paris, where he spent almost twenty years. It was there that I first met him. For some time, he lived with me and we had long discussions about music and many other things, and, of course, we played music together, too. For Martinů this, perhaps, was the most important part of his life. His enthusiasm for France had been awakened in Prague by Debussy – but when he came to Paris, another musical great had taken command there: Stravinsky. I knew him well, too, and so I was able to introduce Martinů to his works and personality in some detail.

It was very interesting for me to see how Martinů would react to Stravinsky's music. At first, he was completely carried away by it. This was a meeting of two geniuses which could lead only to one of two solutions: Either one of them would swallow up the other, or they would go in diametrically opposite directions – no other possibility existed. What actually happened was the second alternative: Martinů started to fight wildly against the influence of Stravinsky inside himself. Stravinsky told me once that Brahms ought to be played only on the guitar, and that the dynamism of the modern age is best expressed by American skyscrapers – Martinů, after all, did not accept that quite as integrally. A musician is a musician, Martinů replied, and for him even that exists which was before. "Stravinsky is deeply rooted in his soil and his people and does not merely climb all over skyscrapers", he

said. Martinů mainly thought of Stravinsky's "Sacre du printemps", which made an enormous impression on him and which he considered the most important composition of our times.

But at the same time he was almost as much interested in jazz and he was particularly impressed by Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue". He went to study with Albert Roussel – or, more often, he did not go – but they became very good friends. Roussel used to visit us at Auteuil, and even though he was another quiet one like Martinů, we sometimes got involved in rather heated discussions – as long, of course, as Martinů's limited supply of French words lasted! In his extensive biography published in Prague, I read that Martinů was unusually gifted in languages and that he knew and mastered French, English, Italian, etc. This unfortunately is quite untrue – he did not know any of these languages properly. During thirty-five years of marriage to a French girl, he never learned French properly, English he knew but a little, and Italian he did not know at all. But the amazing thing is that he was able to teach in America, and he did so very well – he read books in all of these languages and understood the spirit of each language very well.

All of us in Paris, particularly Mrs. Osuský, the Czechoslovak Ambassador's wife, tried hard to obtain an extension of Martinů's scholarship from the Czechoslovak government – which effort, though it was against all regulations, was crowned with success for Martinů during many long years. There was no chance for him to be self-supporting for a long time. I remember that his first public concert appearance was a quartet and a duet for violin and cello. As always for aspiring composers, there were first semi-private concerts. We organised one of those for Martinů in the home of some lady in the Rue de l'Université. The entire apartment was filled with folding chairs so that it was impossible to get through. Martinů himself could not get further than near the door. When the musicians were already well into the duet for cello and violin, a gentleman suddenly pushed his way in noisily, a well-known music critic. Not knowing who was playing, he exclaimed: "What? Today we have an orchestra?" And when he noticed that only two instruments were playing, he said: "Parbleu! Ils sont seulement deux!" It sounded as if an entire ensemble had been playing. Later, I introduced to him the composer, who had been standing modestly near the door. The critic exclaimed: "Ce n'est pas possible!" I don't know whether he meant that it was not possible that this modest fellow should have written such excellent music, or that he could not get it

through his head how the two instruments could have sounded like an orchestra. But he wrote such an enthusiastic review for his paper that the name of Martinů immediately started its way around the world of music.

From our discussions at Auteil, one idea stuck in Martinů's head and ripened there for thirty years. I translated for him from German, (which he did not understand) the epic poem about Gilgameš – it was back in 1924 – but his composition, in the form of a cantata, was not completed until 1955. Otherwise, he was then full of rhythmic inspirations, which culminated in “Halftime and Bagarre”, inspired by the arrival of Lindberg in Paris, as well as the “Rhapsody”, inspired by reminiscences of Bohemia.

Martinů wrote six symphonies, and he would have written nine, like Beethoven, had he lived to this day. In his symphonies and his “Concerto grosso” we find a picture of the growth of his musical genius, just as in Beethoven's case, the intertwining of his tender human spirit with superterrestrial, somehow heavenly rhythms. His creative activity was subconscious, in a way – when he composed, some mysterious force pushed him through all of the little dots he sometimes poured on the score at a wild speeds – but he realized often later, in analysing his own work, that his inspiration had had its source in a particular place or occasion: It came from what he read or what he had been meditating, what he had heard recently or during his very early years. And he read a lot and was interested in everything, including the sciences and Einstein, and things he could not grasp, at first, but in which he felt a strength of mind or conviction.

Martinů wrote twelve operas. He was very much interested in opera – he would see things scenically and often wrote his own librettos or adapted them from what he had read. Today these operas are performed around the world and will continue to be for all time. His *Comedy on the Bridge*, his *Juliette*, his *Greek Passion*, these are immortal works ahead of their time by decades. In his youth, Martinů used to go to the theatre in Prague almost every day – general admission, of course, in the highest gallery – where one could sit down, but only on the staircase outside, without seeing anything – but he knew all operas by heart. How much did all those tones, all those productions, mean to his self-education! Many more he merely read in the scores. He kept reading many things, taking in many outer impressions. On the very day before his death, he told me: “Now I have a very merry topic for an opera . . .” For some time, I had been looking for

topics for him, but I could never have thought of one such as he mentioned on his deathbed: *Hadrian z Římsů*, by Klicpera. “And do you know where this would look great?” he said. “On the turn-table stage in the park at Krumlov!” And when he said that, he was well aware of the fact that he would die a few days or hours later!

Martinů had a deep understanding of the ballet. He was very much impressed by the Russian Diaghilev Ballet, whose culmination Martinů did not see in Paris, but whose spirit lived on in the Ballet Russe of Monte Carlo, where the Russian dancers had shifted their center after Diaghilev's death. In Prague he knew Gzovská and her modern dance, and in Paris he met Kroeschlová in my place; he later wrote several ballets for her. I also introduced him to my Diaghilev circle of Larionov, Gončarová, Massine, and others, and from Martinů's notations on the scores of his ballets, it is clear how exactly he saw the choreography, how scenically he visualized his works. His fantasy was unlimited in this regard, as is shown by his popular “Spalíček” and the intricate dance phantasy, “The Strangler”, for Martha Graham.

It is well-known that Martinů's compositions excel by virtue of his penetrating knowledge of orchestration and instrumentation, and in this regard, he even surpasses Stravinsky, who was not a violinist, and who became a pianist only in later years. Martinů was a born violinist – this is why his string compositions and the orchestration of the “quartet” are unique in his understanding of the possibilities of the string instrument, its coloration in solo expression and in ensemble, and by the technique he calls for without ever exceeding the instruments's possibilities. His works for violin and orchestra will remain examples for all time – solo violin as well as two violins with orchestra (from the times when he thought of himself together with his friend Novák, with whom he played so much), cello and orchestra, viola and trio with orchestra. All of these are today a delight for violinists and instrumentalists.

There are numerous piano compositions – altogether about forty. Although he was not specifically a concert pianist, he knew the instrument perfectly and loved it, particularly because it gave him a chance to put rhythm into it, sometimes not to be stopped. And in many of his orchestral compositions and operas, he called for a piano obbligato. When we played together, he always played the piano, and was able to sightread marvelously, and he always added something while playing, as I often noticed with surprise. I would rather have had him play the violin, although I must say that he did not have a virtuoso's grip even

on the violin (which is probably why Talich put him into the last row of the second violins) – having been self-taught, he had got used to a somewhat unorthodox manner of holding the violin. For his friends, piano virtuosi, he wrote several concertos for piano and orchestra, and they are all world-renowned – both the one written for Firkušný (no. 3) and the one dedicated to Mrs. Mája Sachrová, who – together with her husband – cared for Martinů like a mother, particularly during the last years of his life. Compositions “on order” often could not seem to get off his pen so easily, even labors of deep gratitude – for example, the composition he wrote in Rome for Mrs. Sachrová. “I don’t know how to start”, he confided in me. Innocently I suggested: “Start with the piano and the whole thing will come to you easily”. “But are not you a composer?” he replied professor-like. “You never start a piano concerto with the piano part”. “But what if it does not work?” I asked. But it did work. When I came to see him in his “Tusculum” on the Gianicolo the next time, the piano concerto for Mrs. Mája was already thundering out until the old upright seemed to bend. “So you did find the way to start!” “Well, of course, I started with the violins, and that was that”. True – Martinů started with the violins throughout his entire musical life, and that was that.

It is hard to say what is best in Martinů’s work – everything is so perfect, everything speaks to every human being in such direct language. But to hear his cantatas – that, after all, is something special, and if he had written nothing but those, he would still be the greatest musical spirit today. In them there is the entire mystic credo of Bohuslav Martinů. There is in them, also, the spirit of his Czech patriotism, buried deeply like religion. Even his songs were full of these impressions, but his cantata is like a song orchestrated in all of the parts of the choir, a song of the entire collective of voices, which in themselves add the deeply human touch. Whether it is “Kytice”, “Hora tří světél”, the epic poem, “Gilgameš”, or the “Prophecy of Isaiah”, the “Clearing of the Wells”, or the “Legend from the Smoke of the Potato Plants”, I would not know which to put in first place. “Gilgameš” is, of course, Martinů’s greatest credo – thirty years it had been ripening in him, and so it remains a giant for all time in musical composition, just like the epos itself. That belongs to the entire world. But for his countrymen, the “Clearing of the Wells” remains the Bible, which talks to us in the innermost direct speech, soul to soul, although you do not know why, and you cry when you hear Martinů’s “Wells”.

After seventeen difficult, but, after all, happy years in France, Martinů was forced to flee before the advancing Germans in 1940. The war not only meant the breaking point for the history of Europe and the entire world, but also and completely so for Martinů's life. He had at his side his faithful wife Charlotte, a French girl from the Oise, who, with her practical sense for mundane things was able to organize this tragic parting from France. Martinů himself, innocent and impractical as he was, could not have handled it alone. Even during this dramatic flight and in the midst of all the tragic events, he merely looked for some space somewhere on the table, or a wooden log, on which he could compose. When he could not work, he could not live. He, as hardly any other person, exemplifies Victor Hugo's claim that genius is the "great sum total of work".

After a thousand troubles, he finally made it to New York, together with his wife. And there, in 1941, began an entirely new twelve-year period in his life. A musician has friends all over the world – and this is particularly true of Czech musicians. Martinů found friends here easily. His fame had traveled ahead of him to the United States, thanks to Serge Koussevitsky, who had performed "Bagarre" and other substantial works of Martinů's many years before, in Boston, right after the Paris première of "Bagarre". It was to Koussevitsky's credit that Martinů started right away to compose symphonies, and that, starting in 1942, he wrote another symphony every year in America. Thanks to Koussevitsky, Martinů did not have to go through a period of financial need, for he got him a job as a professor of composition from his very first years in the United States. Martinů was able to hold to this line, and after teaching at Tanglewood in the Berkshires, he continued teaching composition for six years at the Mannes School of Music in New York and at Princeton, to which he commuted from New York.

In America, Martinů also found a ready welcome from his countrymen and, sometimes, devoted friendship, as in the case of the Czech musician Frank Rybka, Emanuel Ondříček, and others. The Clevelanders even ordered a symphony, and he dedicated his second symphony to them, full of longing for his native country and tender melodiousness. Martinů also commemorated the suffering of the old country during the war in his composition, "Memorial to Lidice", which was performed in New York by another enthusiastic follower of Martinů's, Artur Rodzinski.

Martinů liked his teaching assignments in America very much, even though there were great difficulties, particularly because of his lack of

knowledge of the English language. But his informal friendly contact with his pupils made up for that, and soon they were all rooting for him. He remembered his Czech predecessors in America, Dvořák and Weinberger, who did not have a very easy time, either. The only thing he was sorry about was that it took him so much time – after the performance of the “Concerto grosso” in Boston, he had so many orders from all sides, all of a sudden, that he could not fill them all. And they did not come only from America, but, after the war, from Europe, too; in fact, even during the war, the diligent Mr. Sacher at Basel kept asking for something new all the time.

Those twelve years in America were, therefore, a very fruitful time for Martinů, though his everyday life was often rather difficult – he could not always find a quiet corner where he could compose in peace, and the dynamic tempo of America always excited and diverted him. This was no longer little Bohoušek with his fiddle, nor the unruly student from Prague, nor the peaceful introvert of the walking trips with the Paris Bouquinists – here he was the professor of composition and the famous composer who was forced to fight for time and life like all the others in this land of American skyscrapers.

In America, he had a very serious accident, from which he kept suffering for many years, even after his return to Europe. In 1947, he fell off a balcony at Great Barrington – there was no railing there and he did not notice that at night. The accident was terrible. Only by a miracle did he stay alive. He did continue teaching at Princeton, but everything was much harder for him. He had just planned to return to liberated Czechoslovakia, and now that was impossible. After that, the rush of life in America bothered him even more.

When he was able to return to Europe after the war, life became a little more romantic again, but only in his place of residence – his work was the same everywhere – thousands of little marks crowding his music paper. All those scores Martinů wrote – sometimes they ran 500 to 700 pages. And sometimes he did whole parts over again. He was never satisfied the first time. I remember how he struggled in Rome with the score of the “Greek Passion”, which was rewritten so often that it might have sufficed for two or three operas, not just one.

In Europe, he lived for some time in Paris, at Vieux Moulins, the birthplace of his wife, in Nizza, and in Switzerland, where he was a permanent guest of Mr. and Mrs. Sacher at Pratteln near Basel. We met again in Rome, after many years, when he came there on a fellowship from the American government. He had just become a member of the

National Institute of Arts and Letters, and so his work as a teacher and composer had earned him recognition and an appointment as professor at the American Academy in Rome. There were, however, no pupils of composition, and he could devote himself fully to his own composition. That he did with great diligence and verve, although he started to get very bad pains in his right hand, so that he could not hold the pen, but could write only on the typewriter.

There he wrote "The Rock", on a topic from American history, there he finished the first version of the "Greek Passion", in collaboration with Jan Brázda from Stockholm, there his "Zbojníci" was created, a composition for men's choir written for the Prague Madrigalists, and the "Legend from the Smoke of the Potato Plants", and then the first "Parables". We were searching for a title for those "Parables", but nobody could come up with one that suited him. Our surprise was great when Martinů announced the title "Parables". It had not occurred to anyone that there be something geometric in it – it was so Czech and harmonious. That geometry only he saw in it, as he would so often see in things something entirely different from the rest of the world. He was a very original type of fellow, that Bohuslav Martinů. He seemed to be interested in everything between heaven and earth, but somehow he was not satisfied with anything, particularly not with traditional values. He could not be swayed by any prefabricated opinion. During discussions, he would remain silent, but when he spoke up in the end, it became apparent that his mind had been going in entirely different ways, often in the opposite direction from all the others. Provided, of course, that he did follow the discussion to the end at all! Often, his thoughts got hold of some new line and went off in an entirely different direction.

Martinů was not merely a composer; he was also a very gifted writer. His articles about music, his analyses of his own works on playbills, as well as his reviews of the works of others, show deep literary and philosophic insight. Had he been a writer, he would probably have written like James Joyce, following the threads of his own thoughts without being diverted by anything else, perhaps to infinity. In music, despite his aversion to classic composition and counterpoint, he had to follow a certain musical logic which begins and ends in accordance with some unwritten law of tonality. And sixty minutes of music mean a rather substantial score, under the load of which both composer and listener may get tired. But books he would have written

without ever coming to an end. This is obvious from the long letters he liked to write.

After his stay in Rome, we would meet only sporadically, until the alarming letters from him and from Mme. Charlotte made me hasten to the Liestal Hospital, where he had undergone a second operation. I almost came too late. It was August 1959, and Martinů was dying. He knew it – he lay there like a mummy being artificially fed, but his mind was unbroken. He talked to me as he always had, with a smile on the dry lips and with the humor that never left him. The main thing was that he could speak in Czech – it was the last Czech conversation he had with anyone, and so he said goodbye to his homeland, in a way, to the country he was longing for so much, but to which he never returned. He did not want to return.

Even in his dreams and during semi-consciousness, he kept composing. When a train passed near the hospital, he would drum the rhythm with his fingers and write music on the bedsheet. When he died, two days after my visit, all of us felt like orphans, all those who knew him and loved his music. His last compositions were not those concertos listed in the official lists of his works, but a series of little piano compositions he wrote for a lady in Basel who had a music school there and who, in her innocence, asked him for “something easy for pupils”. He complied even that time, even on his deathbed, as a gift to her.

Forgive me for mentioning one point in this paper, which seemingly does not belong here, but which has not been ventilated anywhere by anyone publicly, as yet, and which is sure to become a much-debated topic some day – namely, the relation of Bohuslav Martinů to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and to Communism. In view of the fact that the so-called “official” biographer of Martinů lives in Prague, and therefore speaks for the Communist government or, at least, to suit its purposes, he tries to talk about Martinů, and will continue to do so, as if Martinů had been one of theirs, which, of course, he never was. Since I am well-informed in this matter, I should like to say a few words.

Martinů always sympathized with the people in his old country, that is, with those he knew well and who were close to him, and his relation to them never changed because of the régime that existed there, whatever it was. He kept in touch with them as he did with his former friends in Czechoslovakia. Martinů’s music has recently been played in Czechoslovakia, even under the Communist régime, like Stravinsky’s in Russia. Both felt with the people, but they never approved of any

dictatorial régime. Martinů was a man who valued individual freedom and freedom of mind above anything else and made no bones about it toward representatives of the régime. The Prague government tried to persuade Martinů to return to Czechoslovakia; many emissaries were sent after him to persuade him to come back. Martinů was never persuaded. The last attempt of this sort occurred in Rome, and a smiling Martinů described to me the entire incident.

Thus, it is untrue if the representatives of Prague claim that Martinů wanted to go home. Two days before his death, he told me, literally: “And don’t send me home – until there is freedom there again”. He did not want to go home even after his death. A representative of the régime had visited him in the Liestal Hospital and asked the attending physician to send Martinů back to Prague by plane – the Prague government made available a special plane for the purpose. The doctor opposed the idea energetically, on the grounds that it would mean Martinů’s immediate death, and besides, he said, “*du reste, il ne le désire aucunement*”.

The Communist régime would have wanted very much to have Martinů return – this would then have been used for political propaganda. But the fees for the very frequent performances of his works in Czechoslovakia were never paid him while he was abroad. Once, I intervened in this matter at the Unesco headquarters in Paris, when Martinů was already ill, and I asked for a release of his royalties from Prague, pointing out that he did not have sufficient means and had to be a guest of his friends even at the hospital. I have the correspondence about that. They sent him a measly few hundred Swiss francs, then, without being ashamed of themselves.

That our people at home longed for him and reverently listened to his music, is a known fact; the “Wells”, in particular, was received everywhere with such ovations that the police had to step in. For there, it was entirely clear what Martinů thought about the régime – that one ought to “clear out all the wells” in ancient fashion. Everybody at home understood the meaning of that. And what the reaction at home had been, one of his admirers wrote to him. Martinů left the original letter with me. It says – and I quote only the beginning, since the letter is six pages long – “My dear maestro, another year has passed, the eleventh since the war, during which we have not had any occasion to see you among ourselves at least for a short while. There was some talk about the possibility this year that you might come here [the letter is dated in 1956], even more so than in previous years, and that is

perhaps the reason why the disappointment about your absence is so much stronger for many of us. This, of course, is not meant as a reproach, rather only as an expression of our longing for you. The reasons for your absence are well-founded, I am sure, – no one who heard the “Clearing of the Wells” and who knows only a small part of your work, would dare to doubt that, and I think that the majority of people who know how to think understand your reasons and share them fully. To the extent that there are any reproaches, they certainly must go to some other address!”

This was a voice that spoke for almost the entire Czechoslovak nation, the nation loved by Martinů, which will love him forever.

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