

the apocalyptic visions of luboš fišer

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It is now more than three years since the death of Luboš Fišer (30.9.1935–23.6.1999), a distinctive and distinguished figure in post-war Czech music.

Fišer's path to the fulfilment of his destiny in life was not direct, since his mother did not regard composing as a respectable trade and wanted her son to become an engineer. Fortunately, however, after failing the entrance examinations for middle industrial school and a short episode working in a chemical plant, he was able to study at the Prague Conservatory and later at the Music Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (AMU).

There he drew attention as early as 1960 with his graduation piece – the one-act opera *Lancelot*, for which Eva Bezděková wrote a libretto on motifs from a medieval Flemish legend. That he showed great talent, richness of invention and outstanding ability as a musical dramatist in his very first major work will be clear enough from the fact that the piece has remained in opera company repertoire to this day.

According to Fišer's old friend, the composer

Otmar Mácha, the success of *Lancelot* was one of the reasons why film makers soon noticed and exploited the composing talent of the young Fišer (let us remember that the composer's first film and television music was written in the early 60s). His huge melodic inventiveness and sense of the dramatic secured Fišer, alongside Zdeněk Liška, for example, a leading place among the creators of Czech film music.



Several of his more than three hundred works for film won prestigious awards (e.g. *Bludiště noci* [The Labyrinth of Night] – Prix d'Italia 1969, *Zlatí úhoři* [Golden Eels] – Prix d'Italia 1980, *Golet v údolí* [Golet in the Valley] and *Král Ubu* [Ubu Roi] – Czech Lion 1995 and 1996). In 1986 his television opera *Věčný Faust* [Eternal Faust] (1983–85) on a libretto by Eva Bezděková and Jaromil Jireš, won 1st Prize at the International Television Opera Competition in Salzburg. Nonetheless, despite the mastery he achieved in the field of film music, the real core and originality of his personality as a composer is to be found in his concert music.

Let us look at least briefly at the vivid palette of his pieces for his favourite instrument, the piano, for which he wrote inter alia eight sonatas that continue to enjoy popularity. The often performed one-movement 4th Piano Sonata was dedicated by the twenty-nine-year-old Fišer to the memory of his former fellow student, friend and first performer of the 1st Piano Sonata – Antonín Jemelík. In 1962 the latter had died tragically (coal gas poisoning, which at the time was unfortunately not so unusual a death – the popular artist and

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comedian Jiří Šlitr and the poet Václav Hrabě, for example, died this way).

The shared musical loves of Luboš Fišer and Antonín Jemelík had included the work of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin, and Fišer chose a three-bar quotation from the Russian master's 10th Piano Sonata op. 70 as a motto for the dedicated sonata. The whole piece opens with it and returns to it several times. According to another of the composer's friends, the pianist František Maxián, the special relationship that Fišer had with Scriabin's music was also summed up in his enigmatic comment, "We are all Scriabin", with its many possible meanings.

Much of Fišer's other work in the field of pure music also deserves our attention. As an example let us at least mention *Crux* for violin and timpano and its nearly cancelled premier at the Prague Spring Festival in 1970. For ideological reasons the managers of the festival tried to prevent its performance, since on the one hand its title used the motif of the Christian cross, a religious symbol incompatible with the ruling ideology, and on the other it followed on, with direct musical quotation, from Fišer's preceding piece – *Requiem*, also looked on with disfavour (it had been finished in 1969 and was considered to be clearly the composer's reaction to the invasion of August 1968. It involved the use of long passages of classical text, with strikingly frequent emphasis on the Latin word "libera" – free). The violinist Gideon Kremer, who was to perform *Crux*, stood up for its musical quality, however, and declared that if he were not allowed to play it he would immediately cancel his further

appearances at the festival. The piece was performed, therefore, thanks to the personal courage of a Soviet musician.

In the field of chamber music we might also mention the sonata for violin and piano *Ruce* [Hands] (1961), *Reliéf* for organ solo (1964), and the string quartet *Testis* (1980). We should also remember the outstanding melodrama *Istanu* (1980) written on an ancient Hittite text for a recitor, alto recorder and four players on percussion instruments.

In this short account of Fišer's pieces we must certainly not forget the chillingly powerful and visionary *Lamentation over the Destruction of the Town of Ur* (1970) inspired by a Sumerian text, for solo baritone, three reciters, children's mixed and recitation choir, timpani and bells.

Among Fišer's orchestral works we should mention at least *Double* – a witty musical "dialogue" between Luboš Fišer and his Baroque namesake Johann Fischer. Of his orchestral pieces that have been premiered abroad, we might mention the *Serenades for Salzburg* (Salzburg 1978) or *Report* for large wind orchestra (New York 1971).

Fišer first began to win an international reputation with his orchestral piece *Patnáct listů podle Dürerovy Apokalypsy* [Fifteen Leaves based on Dürer's Apocalypse]. It was written in 1965 and in the same year won third prize in the International Prague Spring Composition Competition, but reaped much greater success a year later (1966) in Paris, where it was awarded first prize in the UNESCO International Composers Platform competition. In 1967 the piece won yet another award in the form of the Union of Czechoslovak Com-

posers' Prize. Fifteen Leaves was premiered by the Czechoslovak Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Václav Neumann on the 15th of May 1966 at a Prague Spring Festival concert.

There is obviously a strong connection between this piece and the later composition for chamber and mixed choir á cappella – *Caprichos* (1966), inspired by Francisco Goya's print cycle of the same name, and the vocal-instrumental *Requiem* (1969), that has already been mentioned. Luboš Fišer himself confirmed the connection (*Hudební rozhledy* 1969, p. 133), when he said that he „conceived [his] Requiem as end and culmination of a triptych“, the first and second sections being Fifteen Leaves based on Dürer's Apocalypse and Caprichos.

The Fifteen Leaves turned out to be a crucial work that for some years determined the composer's development. The fundamental importance of the piece in his output is indirectly confirmed by the testimony of the musicologist Marie Kulijevyčová, Fišer's wife at the time, that in 1964 he stopped composing entirely for about six months. Only after this pause did the new orchestral work emerge. It is a work in which Fišer's highly individual style came to maturity, but which also clearly shows the influence of the aleatoric and timbre compositions characteristic of the development of New Music at the time. Jaroslav Smolka (in his study-Skladatel Luboš Fišer) notes that precisely at the time the piece was written Czech musicians were able to follow and study contemporary developments in New Music on the world scene much more easily and systemati-

cally than before. The reason was the political thaw of the early Sixties and the revival of musical contacts with the West via the Warsaw Autumn festivals. Smolka identifies stimuli for Fišer's work primarily in the Polish school, in the music of Witold Lutoslawski (the melodic with a predominance of second, fourth and fifth intervals in his Mourning Music) and of Krzysztof Penderecki (the timbre passages and proportional notation in Tren – a victim of Hiroshima). We might also find some connections in the timbre compositions of György Ligeti (Atmosphères, Lontano).

Fišer devoted great attention to the preparation of the note material on which he built his triptych. In the international context we might find parallels, for example, in Olivier Messiaen's ideas on modal composition in the Fifties. The whole structure of Fifteen Leaves and Caprichos is developed exclusively from the symmetrically arranged six-tone mode B, C, C sharp, F, F sharp, G. The remaining identically structured group of D, D sharp, E, G sharp, A, A sharp, called negative in line with the theory presented by Karel Janeček (Základy moderní harmonie, Praha 1965), is never heard in the pieces at all (nor any singly note of negative). It is only in the Requiem that Fišer extends the note material, in order that „after the night of the Apocalypse and the terror of Caprichos, and the lamentations for the dead at the beginning of the Requiem, the daybreak should come“ (Hud. rozhledy 1969, p.133). This „daybreak“ is achieved precisely by the extension of tone material. Fišer closes the whole Requiem, and so the whole triptych in which not a single consonant harmony has been heard, with a quiet Amen set into a C Major chord. In the context of the whole triptych this chord is extremely dramatic and brings the necessary catharsis to the work. Although with its semi-tone construction Fišer's modus hardly provides much space for the development of melodic line, in the Fifteen Leaves the composer builds up a number of motifs from which the structure of the composition emerges. Immediately in the very first, rhythmically simply constructed motif (32nd notes), which will resound in the 1st Leaf together with the sound of the harpsichord and the claves, Fišer is exhausting all the notes of the mode. The most striking characteristic of this motif is the sinkingly rising movement, and it is this movement that points most forcefully to affinity with the motif that first appears in the 3rd Leaf in the string section, although this latter motive is strongly rhythmicised. Both motifs are composed of both the trichords of the mode, i.e. of both B, C, C sharp and F, F sharp, G. Apart from the motifs constructed in this way, roughly in the middle of the whole composition, in the 7th Leaf, we find another motif that differs from the earlier ones primarily by its movement within a single trichord (B, C, C sharp). All motifs appear in the piece unchanged and the economy of motif material is also projected onto the vertical level of the work, thus strengthening the overall asceticism of the approach to composition. There is not a single linking transition in the whole piece. The

entrance of a new element is always entirely a matter of cutting in, with no interconnection. Unchanged in terms of melody and rhythm, the motifs are clearly identifiable and directly create the closed character of the form (the harpsichord like motif with the sound of the keyboard in the 1st and 15th Leaf works most conspicuously to this effect).

As far as the inspiration Fišer drew from Albrecht Dürer's print cycle is concerned, the author commented as follows in the preface to the score of the work (Supraphon, Prague 1967): „Apocalipsis cum figuris must not be misleading for the interpretation of the work. Its influence on the work is purely as a source of association, It is expressed in the internal structure of the composition, i.e. acoustic strictness, classical tools and a certain order corresponding to the graphic purity of Dürer's idiom.“ Fišer's old friend František Maxián believes that while this claim is truthful, it deliberately reveals little about the real character of the inspiration. The reason was perhaps that the composer may have felt himself forced into a situation, a little against his will (Fišer's distaste for discussing his own pieces was well-known) in which following the success of the piece he had to say something about it. And so he deliberately commented in the most ambiguous way.

We can only speculate on the real connections between Fišer's and Dürer's Fifteen Leaves, but it is hard to ignore a strong and urgent sense of affinity when looking at Dürer's print cycle while listening to Fišer's music. There are several immediate connections between the two. Both artists, roughly thirty years old, here created the culmination of their work so far. It was in the Apocalipsis cum figuris that Dürer's style as an engraver matured, that he fully capitalised on the knowledge of contemporary developments in art that he had acquired on his Italian travels while also laying the foundation for the development of free pictorial prints. Likewise Fišer's individual style came to maturity in the Fifteen Leaves, and like Dürer he was drawing on contemporary developments – the New Music – in his own discipline.

Another significant aspect is the symbolism of the number 7 and 12 to be found both in the New testament Revelation of St. John and in Dürer's cycle (for example, the book in the right hand of the Father sealed with 7 seals, the way that the sacrificial lamb receiving this book has seven eyes and seven horns – Figure II, the seven trumpets of seven angels – fig. VI, the dragon with seven heads – fig. IX, XI, XIII, also the twelve and twelve elders on thrones around the throne of the Father – fig. II, the twelve times twelve thousand designated servants of God, who will be spared – fig. V, the twelve gates with the names of the twelve generations of Israel guarded by twelve angels – fig. XIV) We also find this symbolism in Fišer's work. In the 7th Leaf there is a conspicuous calming passage in which all the orchestral instruments fall silent and the solo flute brings what is the very first projection of the motif (which consists of seven notes) that works in contrast to the earlier motifs pro-

duced within the framework of the single tri-chord B, C, C sharp. Every time one of the motifs is quoted in Fišer's work, this motif is repeated two or three times. This repetition occurs regularly in the piece and forms sections that together occupy the space of twelve leaves (after Leaves 1 and 2 and before the 15th Leaf).

A much less obscure connection is evident in the harpsichord motif with the sound of the claves in the last of Fišer's leaves. The total deployment of all the instruments of the orchestra in the 15th Leaf in two short verticals is disquieting. Events from the 1st Leaf are then repeated. In the ninth second the harpsichord enters the sound of the claves once again playing the fallingly rising motif composed of all the notes of the six-tone mode. It is a situation similar to that of Dürer's last leaf: the Archangel Michael binding the devil, with whom the fight has just ended. Above this scene the angel shows John the “New Jerusalem”, but instead of the city described in Revelations we see only a town of Dürer's time, which is far from shining with the precious stones and gold seen by St. John. One of the walls of the town is even in a state of collapse. In the same way in Fišer's 15th Leaf we hear nothing that might remind us of the beauties of the “New Jerusalem”. Everything has been said, and we are waiting for it to be said. We are at the beginning, and again feel time slowly dripping away with each strike of the claves. Time, which none of the walls of Dürer's “New Jerusalem” will resist.

A certain indeterminacy in the relations between kinds of art is not a shortcoming, but something more like a special quality. By juxtaposing the determinacy and indeterminacy of certain relations, by testing and searching, we can find a new and surprising effect in the old. With this brief glance at Fišer's key orchestral work of the 1960s we can pose the question whether it is even possible to analyse a work of art definitively. We can of course fairly reliably conduct a technical analysis, and give a detailed account of how the piece is constructed, but this may give only a very partial sense of the real character of the music. Every layer of meaning uncovers a new layer, which invites further analysis. And every analysis is in the end only one version of the inexhaustible quantity of interpretations of the work. In this sense we can find no satisfactory answer to our question and we need to give up the idea of any final decipherment of the work. Neither the person who tries to analyse the piece and understand its mechanisms, not even the composer who worked with those mechanisms, can ever entirely understand all the levels of the work. We should, however, stress that this is one of the most important aspects of art and that which helps to make art what it is. A magical ritual of hidden and partially revealed meanings.