

DOUBLE BASS IN CZECH MUSIC OF THE 21st CENTURY WITH A FOCUS ON SOLO AND CHAMBER MUSIC LITERATURE IN A HISTORICAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

My dissertation project *Double bass in Czech music of the 21st century with a focus on solo and chamber music literature in a historical and international context* aims to convey a report about the state of the Czech contemporary music for double bass in the new millennium. The output value should be a summarization and cataloguing of new compositions, a comparison of the same and a description of them in both an international and historical context. Another important aspect of this thesis is the case analysis of some pieces and a description of compositional techniques used. This work is meant to be mainly for musical high school (conservatories in the Czech Republic) and musical universities students and pedagogues, as well as double bass interpreters and others interested in this topic, who want to broaden their horizons and discover the state of the contemporary Czech literature for double bass and learn new and often superior compositions. First and foremost, an encyclopaedic style summarization of contemporary double bass pieces should provide a useful tool for all readers interested in discovering new pieces for the deepest string instrument. Another important point of the thesis is a description and explanation of the most common interpretation techniques and a guide to their realisation in praxis.

Intended content of the dissertation thesis

1. Introduction
2. Historical context – a brief description of the development and tendencies in double bass literature after 1945
3. Main research – Czech double bass literature of the new millenium
 - 3.1. The methods of research
 - 3.2. Compositions for double bass solo
 - 3.3. Compositions for double bass and piano
 - 3.4. Chamber music compositions with the participation of double bass
 - 3.5. Transcription of compositions for solo double bass
4. Comparison and contextualization of Czech double bass literature created after the year 2000 with international development and tendencies, or with important compositions of world double bass literature
5. Case analysis of selected compositions

6. Theory of Interpretation
 - 6.1. New technique demands and means of expression, description of their sound characteristics and realization
 - 6.2. Problems of notation
 - 6.3. Modern double bass notation and its realization shown on chosen excerpts
7. Interviews with composers, results of questionnaires
8. Conclusion – Summary of knowledge and its evaluation

Starting points of the project

It is natural, that at the beginning of writing, following questions are occurring. Once finished, thesis should provide the answers for these so far unanswered questions. Paragraphs bellow are describing the most important issues written and analysed in the thesis:

1. Cataloguing

The aim of the thesis is to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary compositions for the double bass after the year 2000, discover them, describe them, and try to categorise according to their level of difficulty, instrumentation, form, style, composition technique used, etc. In addition to domestic (Czech) composition, the thesis also focuses on important pieces of double bass repertoire from all over the world.

Since the turn of the millennia, many remarkable compositions for double bass (in solo and chamber music literature) have emerged both in the Czech Republic and worldwide. Many of them are high-quality works that would deserve popularization, description and contextualization. This aspect – the cataloguing element of the dissertation – provides a useful aid to all readers interested in the orientation in the contemporary double bass repertoire.

2. Contextualization. Lightening the topic from historical and international perspective

The thesis attempts to provide an answer to following questions:

- How many compositions for double bass solo and chamber music with double bass were created in new millennium in the Czech Republic?
- Is there any connecting (common) feature or element among these compositions?
- What is the situation in the rest of the world?
- Are there any similarities between the new compositions for double bass written in the Czech Republic and those created abroad?
- Why do some composers choose the double bass as a solo instrument?
- Is it common for contemporary composers to write for the double bass?
- The 18th, 19th and first half of the 20th century represented a great heyday of double bass pieces written by double bass players, offering an extensive (and very

interesting) repertoire.¹ This correlates with the fact that many musicians of past centuries were not only single instrument players; on the contrary, they were far more versatile. Apart from being a bass player, they were very often educated as a composer, conductor (Kapellmeister), multi-instrumentalists, choir leaders, etc. Thus another interesting area to investigate would be whether or not this tradition has been broken or still continues even today.

The thesis attempts to locate new compositions in their historical and international context, compare current works with pieces of the recent past (for example after 1980 or important works of the second half of the 20th century), or to compare with the most recent foreign works for the double bass.

In contemporary music from all over the world there is growing popularity of the double bass as a solo and chamber music instrument. This is evidenced by many works by renowned composers such as S. Gubaidulina, E. Carter, P. Maxwell Davis, G. Scelsi, I. Xenakis, G. Bryars, E. Rautavaara, Ph. Glass, P. Eötvös, K. Saariaho, J. Widmann, O. Neuwirth or R. Saunders etc.

The situation in the Czech Republic is similar: many renowned composers have already written pieces for double bass, for example:

- Hanuš Bartoň – *Moto continuo per contrabbasso e pianoforte*;
- Jiří Bezděk – *Duo for flute and double bass, Překročit svůj stín* [Exceed your shadow] for flute, accordion, and double bass;
- Sylvie Bodorová – *Bruromano*, double concerto for guitar, double bass with orchestra
- Jan Ryant Dřízal – *Leviathan* for unaccompanied double bass, *Head Ööd* – double bass quartet;
- Miloslav Gajdoš – *Czech Phantasy* for double bass and orchestra and plenty of other compositions;
- Tomáš Karpíšek – *Suite for unaccompanied double bass Nr. 1 – Liturgical*;² *Suite for unaccompanied double bass Nr. 2 – Images of Lapland*; *Capriccio* – for double bass solo; *Duo for cello and double bass – Befiel du deine Wege*;
- Miroslav Kubička – *Hrátky hravé i dravé* – Rondo for double bass and piano, *Chamber concerto for double bass and wind quintet*;
- Ondřej Kukul – *Contrabassiana* – concerto for double bass and string orchestra;
- Jiří Laburda – *Dialogues for two double basses*;
- Jiří Matys – *Hudba pro kontrabas solo* [Music for double bass solo]; *Suita for two double basses, S tatínkem...* [With a father...]. Compositions for double bass and piano;
- Petr Popelka – *Arabesky* [Arabesques] for double bass and piano;
- Jan Rösner – *Composition for trombone strings and 6 gongs*;
- Pavel Samiec – *Zátiší* [Retreat] – for violin, accordion, and double bass;
- Ondřej Štochl – *Šeptet* [7 whispers] – for clarinet, two violins, cello, double bass, piano and guitar; *Sotto voce* – for horn, double bass and guitar;

¹ Let's name at least Josef Hrabě, František (Franz) Simandl, František Gregora, Adolf Mišek, František Černý, František Hertl etc. More detailed informations at KMENT, Jan. *Nejhlubší z rodu smyčců: dějiny a literatura kontrabasu*. Praha: Supraphon, 1988.

² Search results – Recital Music. *Welcome to Recital Music – Recital Music* [online]. Copyright © Copyright 2009 Recital Music. Site Queries [quoted 12.12.2021]. Available at: <http://www.recitalmusic.net/spweb/publications.php?q=Karpisek&printedmusic=Y&pdf=Y&mp3=Y&mp4=Y>

- Jiří Teml – *Šumavské variace* [Šumava variations] – for two violins, viola, cello and double bass; *Solo for double bass*;³
- Jan Vičar – *Musica da canzonetta for viola and double bass*;
- Evžen Zámečnik – *Three inventions in old style* – for cello and double bass; *Little suite for four double basses*;
- Pavel Novák Zemek – *String quartet No. 5* – for four double basses; *Unisoni Sacri No. 3* – double bass sonata with bells.

3. Composition and interpretation analysis

In order to comprehend the music well, is necessary to get some deeper insight into the music / score. Therefore, it is vital to provide a case analysis of selected compositions regarding their style, use of compositional techniques, interpretation requirements as well as instrumental and technical requirements. Combination of this case analysis and description of other compositions should allow us to make an attempt to describe and analyse the current trends and tendencies in the double bass literature of the 21st century.

4. Pedagogical use

Summary of knowledge in this field, especially cataloguing of new compositions, their contextualization and description of new interpretation techniques and requirements, which altogether create some kind of core element of this thesis, should serve as a handy tool for students and teachers at various levels of music education system. Although this work is aimed primarily for teachers and students in higher level of their education (conservatories and music academies), it could be useful for young students and even for amateur musicians as well. Some of the pieces named above have medium or medium-low difficulty level and can be used and played at the music schools by young musicians (for example at ZUŠ – primary music education level in the Czech Republic).

5. The methods of research

Another important aspect of this thesis is to search for the new compositions for double bass. But, how to discover the new and often unknown literature? It is necessary to set some ways of searching for the new compositions. To apply some methodology. So far, I have decided to consider only the compositions, which already held their premiere or were published. This would be the main source relevant for my dissertation. In the following I describe the methods for searching for the compositions:

1. Search in the program booklets of the important festivals of contemporary music;
2. Search in the catalogues of important (all known) music publishers;
3. Conduct a short questionnaire to all Czech conservatories and music universities.

³ Noty Jiří Teml: Sólo pro kontrabas – Radiotéka. *Radiotéka – Knihy, Audioknihy, CD, DVD, notové záznamy* [online]. Copyright © 1997 [quoted 12.12.2021]. Available at: <https://www.radioteka.cz/detail/cronoty-53154-jiri-templ-solo-pro-kontrabas>

Apart from searching for the new compositions, there is one another way how to support the creation of new music for double bass: directly ask composers and inspire them to write some pieces for the deepest string instrument. This sounds like some story from category of dreams, yet it already happens. I personally ask two composers connected with my hometown Pilsen (Jiří Bezděk and Michaela Augustinová) to write a composition for my solo recital in spring 2022 and they both agreed.

Summary

This dissertation thesis is still in progress. Currently it contains more questions than answers. This, however, represents a good starting position because where there is a question, there ought also to be the answer.

Another aspect, why I think it is important to write about such a topic, is that there still is some kind of scepticism on contemporary music. This is probably applicable not only to double bass repertoire. This scepticism is widespread quite often in the academic field or also among some interpreters. It very often originates from not knowing or not having enough information about the newest repertoire. People often tend to be sceptic to a subject they do not know much about. I believe, this vague knowledge is the source (or let say one of the sources) of having an a priori sceptic approach to the subject.

For example, there is not requirement of any piece from 21st century or at least from second half of the 20th century for the entrance exams either for bachelor or for master study at Academy of performing arts in Prague (HAMU)⁴. The most contemporary composition required is some composition created in 20th century. It is quite vague formulation, because this condition complies many pieces written in the 20th century, yet with musical language rooted in romantic era. Slightly better situation is at Janáček's Academy of Performing Arts in Brno (JAMU). Here is at least possibility to choose some composition written by Miloslav Gajdoš.⁵ Although his compositions are usually written in traditional way, they still represent one of the ways of contemporary music. Generally speaking, it is a pity that the newest compositions for double bass are still not taken in account and are not required at entrance exams, years exams or bachelor and master's degree exams. But situation is getting better, because there are already many interesting pieces written by well-known composers abroad as well as in the Czech Republic.

Very positive role in creating of new repertoire is represented by established musical international competitions like for example ARD or Internationaler J. M. Sperger Wettbewerb. These big and renowned competitions often commission a brand-new work by established composers (e. g. *'Tamam Shud'* by Moritz Eggert, ARD Musikwettbewerb Kontrabass 2016),⁶ J. M. Sperger Wettbewerb (e. g. compositions by Emil Tabakov, Wolfram Wagner, Giorgi Makhoshvili, Teppo Hauta-aho, Arnie Egilsson, Frank Proto, Siegfried Matthus, Stefan Schäfer),⁷

⁴ *Akademie múzických umění v Praze. Music and Dance Faculty* [online]. Prague. HAMU: Copyright © AMU 2021 [quoted 09.12.2021]. Available at: <https://www.hamu.cz/cs/katedry-programy/katedra-strunnych-nastroju/prijimaci-rizeni/>.

⁵ *Hra na kontrabas - Hudební fakulta JAMU. Hudební fakulta JAMU - oficiální stránky* [online]. Copyright © JAMU 2020 [quoted 09.12.2021]. Available at: <https://hf.jamu.cz/prijimaci-rizeni/pozadavky-k-prijimacimu-rizeni/hra-na-kontrabas-356/>

⁶ *ARD-Musikwettbewerb 2016 - Rückblick Kontrabass: Grummelndes Ungetüm im Rampenlicht | News und Kritik | BR-KLASSIK | Bayerischer Rundfunk. 301 Moved Permanently* [online]. Copyright © Daniel Delang [quoted 09.12.2021]. Available at: <https://www.br-klassik.de/aktuell/news-kritik/ard-musikwettbewerb-2016-kontrabass-rueckblick-100.html>

⁷ *Spergercompetition - Home.* [online]. Copyright © 2019 Internationale J.M. Sperger Gesellschaft. [cit. 09.12.2021]. Available at: <https://www.spergerwettbewerb.de/index.php/de/>

František Simandl Double Bass Competition (e. g. *Hommage a F. Simandl* by Jiří Teml).⁸

Also, thanks to publishing houses like Recital Music (UK) or Publishing House of Czech Radio / Český rozhlas the situation is improving, with a growing number of new compositions being created, commissioned, and published. It is well worth becoming acquainted with the newest repertoire because many pieces are not only interesting, but also supremely well written compositions.

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About author

Tomáš Karpíšek is a double bass player and a member of the Czech Philharmonic. He graduated from Pilsen Conservatory, Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (class of Jiří Hudec) and Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg im Breisgau (class of Božo Paradžik). He won a number of awards in national and international competitions (e.g. International Double Bass Competition in Lucca, Italy 2018; Preis des Fördervereins der Carl Flesch Akademie e. V.). As a soloist he performed with Baden-Baden Philharmonic and as a guest with Dresdner Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Collegium 1704, and Vienna Philharmonic. He spent almost two years in Vienna, playing in the Wiener Staatsoper. Karpíšek is also a prolific composer who studied composition at the Pilsen Conservatory (class of Jiří Bezděk) and has attended composition seminars in the United Kingdom, Slovakia, and Germany. His compositions have been performed at many festivals in both the Czech Republic and abroad. His symphonic suite *Tales of Don Quixote* was premiered and recorded by the Pilsen Philharmonic. Currently he is enrolled in the PhD program at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

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