

## ALEŠ BŘEZINA CAPTURING THE ZEITGEIST

In a country brimming with talented composers, Aleš Březina stands out for his versatility, originality and egalitarian approach to his craft. For nearly 30 years, his music has filled Czech cinemas and theaters. More recently he has started to create instrumental works for concert performance which have won admirers in a variety of genres – chamber music, orchestral pieces and choral works. Březina's oeuvre is all the more remarkable for being the product of a self-taught composer who feels no inhibitions about juxtaposing the banal and the brilliant, and finding inspiration everywhere from Igor Stravinsky to Frank Zappa. His collaborations with Robert Wilson have set Březina on a new course in music theater, which he describes in this wide-ranging discussion of his work

*You just completed a project that was rather unusual for you.*

Yes, I did the music for a series of three movies by Jan Hřebejk for Czech TV called "The Case for Exorcist." I had to accompany the action step by step, second by second – if it moves up, you have to move up with the music, and if it moves down, the music has to move down. This was the first time I was really illustrating a movie with my music, and it made me realize I've been very privileged to be free in composing whatever I wanted for previous movies.

*If not illustrate or amplify the action onscreen, what should a good film score do?*

The composer shouldn't be an amplifier. He or she should create an additional layer of emotions or information that adds an independent element, a new quality to what you see onscreen. In my view, if you just underline the general mood of what's happening, you might as well stop composing, because that puts the music into a servant role. And I think that's not worthy of a good composer.



PHOTO: L. JANSCH

*How do you typically create a film score?*

I receive the script long before shooting starts, so I have time to think about some possibilities and discuss them with the director or screenwriter. Once we've agreed on a general direction, then I think about the instruments. Working with Jan Hřebejk on *Líbádky* [The Honeymoon], for example, we decided to use a cello, which is able to cover all ranges of string music, a bass clarinet, which does the same thing for wind instruments, an electric guitar and keyboards – a piano, Hammond organ and Wurlitzer. Then, while Jan was shooting the film, I started to work on short layouts – not finished pieces of music, but ideas, a few bars. Then I played them for him, and he told me his opinion about them. When the movie was finished, the editor worked with my layouts. When I saw where he used them, I simply worked out the full score, and we recorded it to the finished movie.



*How did you get started composing music for films?*

I started on command. In 1986, Jan said to me, I am going to study at the film academy and I will make films, and you will be my composer. Because I was the only person he knew who was able to read music, actually. So I wrote the music for all his schoolwork, and we have worked together on most of his major films, like *Divided We Fall*, *Up and Down*, *Beauty in Trouble* and *Kawasaki's Rose*. I also wrote music for some of his fellow students, like Petr Zelenka. I worked with him on his film *The Buttoners*, and years later he directed my chamber opera *Toufar*.

*Your music studies were in violin and musicology. Did you intend to become a composer?*

No, never. All the things you learn during your formal studies, I had to learn from books and scores. And maybe that's better. A colleague of mine, a very good composer, told me, You are very lucky and privileged not to have studied composition. Because I had a wonderful teacher, and I spent the first 20 years after graduation trying to get rid of his influence. Some of the composers I adore never formally studied music. Stravinsky privately studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, and Martinů had a few lessons with Josef Suk in Prague and Albert Roussel in Paris, more like master classes. I think it's a good way not to become one of the crowd.

*What composers have you studied and do you particularly like?*

I started with music from the first half of the 20th century – Stravinsky, Martinů, Honegger and a few others. Then I went on to the second half of the 20th century – Ligeti, Kurtág, Lutosławski, Penderecki. And of course Messiaen was a huge source of inspiration. I also read the scores of a number of composers who are not interesting to me, like Stockhausen and Boulez, just to see into their kitchens. Among living composers, I studied the operas of Peter Maxwell Davies, who is one of my favorites. Also among my favorites are two women, Sofia Gubaidulina and Kaija Saariaho. I had a period where I really studied the American minimalists, Reich more than Glass. The music and thinking of John Cage was a source of intellectual inspiration. I've also studied a lot of great popular and alternative music of the 20th century, where definitely one of the major figures inspiring me was Frank Zappa. And I used to listen to a lot of world music, because I like music which you can immediately put in some cultural and geographic context.

*Turning to your theater work, you've composed the librettos and music for two chamber operas: Tomorrow There Will Be... and Toufar. What prompted you to work in that genre?*

The National Theater wanted a piece for Soňa Červená, and she asked if they would agree to me writing an opera for her. I had never thought of doing music theater. But I felt, if Soňa thinks I'm capable of doing that, I probably am.

*Both of the operas deal with notorious incidents during the communist era: In Tomorrow There Will Be..., the prosecution and execution of Milada Horáková, and in Toufar, the torture and execution of the priest Josef Toufar. What drew you to this material?*

I was interested in this material because it's very operatic – torture, death, strong stories of individuals who get caught in a huge restructuring of society. Everything

was being reshaped for the next couple decades. How do you deal with that? Do you accept the changes and take an opportunistic way of surviving, or do you try to do something against it, like Horáková did in a very political way, and Toufar did in a very humanistic way?

*So it's the dramatic potential that interests you?*

And the sense of right and wrong. In both of these pieces it was my goal to put the viewers in a situation where they ask themselves, where would I stand in this conflict? Would I be part of the aggressive masses demanding the death of Horáková? Would I be one of the parishioners who never spoke up when Toufar was taken away? Toufar had no good choices. It was either betray the church and accept the pro-communist state, or betray the state and keep the Catholic faith. He was very conscious from the beginning that he was in a trap, and I think this is very operatic.

*Much of the libretto for Toufar was drawn directly from official documents.*

I wanted to create a framework of two simultaneous flows. On one side, the Catholic Church, on the other, the communists, speaking two strongly opposite languages, but wanting to achieve the same thing. It was a battle for the soul of the people of Czechoslovakia. Are you going to sell your soul to the communists, or to the Catholics? In that sense, it's not just about Czechoslovakia in 1950.

*You also used documentary records in Tomorrow. Isn't it difficult to compose music to bureaucratic language?*

My way of composing music is to combine things that people would never expect to be combined, in terms of both musical styles and subjects. People who read the libretto for *Tomorrow* would ask me, is that really an opera libretto? How is it possible to set it to music? And I would answer, for me it's much more possible to set that to music than poems, or something in rhymes. Because that prescribes what you have to do. It gives you the structure, and you just fill in the notes. I would much rather work with text that was never supposed to be set to music, because it gives you total freedom to do what you want.

*You also used some unusual instrumentation in the operas. How did you decide on that?*

Well, the first thing I ask with every theater piece is how many musicians I can have. With *Tomorrow* they gave me six, so I used harpsichord, violin, cello, bassoon, bass clarinet and percussion. The harpsichord I chose because of the magnificent sound which at the same time can be very dead. It's a tone that gets one beat and disappears. The strings were for sections of the opera that needed a soft sound with a rich vibrato. Percussion is obvious, and the bass clarinet is simply my favorite instrument. For *Toufar* I could have only four, so I used violin, bass clarinet, electric keyboard with some samples and a number of percussion instruments, including a timpani. Since it took place in a church milieu I wanted a good deep organ sound, and the rich sound of a timpani. Of course I would have loved to write for a large orchestra, because you have many more possibilities. But it's good to have a limited number of sounds, because you have to pay much more attention to structure, and how to keep the attention of the audience.





*Aleš Březina with Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, Soňa Červená and Jiří Nekvasil*

*You seem to have captured something in the zeitgeist with these pieces as well.*

Yes, at the time I was composing *Tomorrow*, the trial of Ludmila Brožová-Polednová, one of Horáková's prosecutors, was underway. And now *Toufar* is playing at the National Theater while they are exhuming a mass grave, hoping to find his remains as the first step to beatification. It's fascinating to deal with these things that surround you, or surrounded your parents and are now coming out again.

*You've done the music for two National Theater productions directed by Robert Wilson: Věc Makropulos (The Makropulos Affair) and 1914. What was it like collaborating with him?*

Inspirational. Working with him made me realize how relevant music can be in theater which is not opera theater. What Bob is doing, starting with *Einstein on the Beach* and up to the Shakespeare sonnets, is using music as the driving force in a theater piece. It's not an opera or a drama, it's a form of music theater that I'm definitely going to do more of in the future.

*Wilson is known to be very demanding. You yourself had the experience of coming in with music all prepared, only to have him rip it up and make you start over.*

Bob knows exactly what he needs. He doesn't know in advance, but as soon as you deliver him your music, he knows exactly, I have to destroy that, I have to use this, I have to elevate this. He uses your music snippets in the same way that he uses words and gestures. If he destroys a song, it's for a specific reason that serves the larger structure. He is merciless, but even toward himself. His best idea, if he sees it doesn't work, or it doesn't serve the work at that moment, or it needs something more simple or more complicated, he is immediately willing to destroy what he produced. That's what I love about Bob: he's so anarchistic. He's a well-organized anarchist.

*In 1914 in particular, you produced a work that is thoroughly integrated. It's impossible to imagine any one element – the movement, music, lighting, dialogue – without the others.*

I often recall Peter Brook, at the end of his career, saying that he sees the decline of pure forms, like pure theater or pure opera, and the emergence of a synthetic form that mixes everything – dance, music, acting, verbal and nonverbal communication. This appeals to me, because I love using words in a musical sense, and I like using movement in a musical sense. I think it has a real unity. In a way it's like going back to the synthetic theater of Richard Wagner, with no similarity in the music whatsoever, but in the sense of the complexity of the links between the libretto and the music and the staging.

*Wagner insisted that he didn't write operas, he wrote music dramas.*

Right, he really considered all parts of the theater equally relevant. And in this way, I think Wilson is doing exactly what Wagner did. It might sound heretical to say that, because what Bob is doing has a lot to do with pop culture, and may not seem as artistic. But if you listen to him talk about his ideas, you can see that he is highly educated. He works out of his belly, but he has the intellectual foundation.

*Are there any role models for what you hope to develop?*

In a recent discussion with students, I called it Total Music Theater. In a way it's similar to what Heiner Goebbels is doing, especially with a piece like *Landscape with Distant Relatives*. And Wilson's work, of course, which has influenced me strongly.

*Have you any music theater projects in the pipeline?*

I am working right now with Martin Vačkář, who has written a wonderful play called *The Arch of Hope*, about the ship *Exodus* that carried Jewish refugees. It will open in České Budějovice in December 2015. This will be something between a traditional play with music and what I have in mind. A purer example is *Life? or Theater*, an extremely interesting project based on the paintings of Charlotte Salomon that I am developing with the Canadian actor Alon Nashman and Pamela Howard, an opera director whom I've known for a long time. We spent three weeks in Toronto last summer creating it together with the actors and musicians, which is the kind of experience I had with Wilson. It will be staged at the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto and we hope to travel with it, possibly to the Czech Republic. So over the next few years, it should be possible to see various versions of my music theater.

*Recently you've also started composing instrumental pieces for concert performance.*

This is something that I started to explore a few years ago, and would like to develop along with music theater. One of the reasons I haven't done much instrumental music is because I am not used to composing something which is performed once, then you have to wait 10 years for a second performance. With music theater, if a piece is successful, you can hear and see it several times a month.



*Falling Leaves for piano and chamber orchestra (excerpt from the 2nd movement)*

But I find a certain fascination in writing music with no theater advantages. You can't hide behind action, images, lighting, whatever – it's just about the musicians and the audience and your music.

### *How much have you written?*

My catalog is quite small, partly because I only write on commission. It's not a question of money, it's a matter of knowing who is going to perform the piece, and when and where. I find it difficult to compose if I don't have a clear idea of the conditions. But when I do, it works very well. Karel Košárek asked me to write a piano concerto that he premiered with the PKF – Prague Philharmonia at his Musica Holešov festival, and it received excellent reviews. I wrote a Requiem for the children's choir in Sušice, in which I sang and learned a lot about music, that I was asked to rearrange for the Boni Pueri choir and a large symphony orchestra,

a performance that was recorded and broadcast by Czech Radio. Then Marek Štrýncl asked me to create a third version for Boni Pueri and Musica Florea, and we invited two very special soloists, Iva Bittová and Vojtěch Dyk, for two performances that sold out at the Janáček May festival and Concentus Moraviae festival. We have plans for additional performances in 2015 and 2016. More recently I wrote a piano trio for the Dvořák Trio, a suite of my film music that was very well-received. I've also written orchestral suites of my film music, and a number of short pieces, including a five-minute melodrama for Soňa Červená.

### *Are there any distinctions in your mind between writing so-called serious music and film music?*

No, for me it's the same level of seriousness. I have to be really taken by the subject, or the people doing it, and believe in the artistic quality of the piece. Otherwise, I don't see any difference between writing good film music, a piece for the National Theater like *Toufar* or *1914*, or a piano concerto for Karel Košárek. Of course I use different techniques, but it's all equally relevant and exactly the same level of communicating with people.

### *So you don't consider film scores a lesser form of music?*

I love film music. It gives you an opportunity to do things you would never be allowed to do in a concert setting. It's so much fun to write music fitting a 19th-century bourgeois movie, or for a movie set in the 1920s or '30s with a lot of allusions to popular music of that time. Or something in a 19th-century German orchestral style for Jiří Menzel's *I Served the King of England*.

### *And you see no need to specialize?*

Bob Wilson likes to say he works with dancers without being a dancer, and does set design without being an architect, and acts without being a formally trained actor. He just worked with people who helped him develop himself, and he's proud not to be a specialist. I feel the same way. The music world is full of specialists. I think it's a huge danger to our art, and one of the reasons contemporary music is so irrelevant. It's specialists composing music for special performers and special audiences.

### *But isn't all contemporary art specialized in some way?*

If you go to experimental films, or theater performances, or art galleries, you find very eager, open-minded audiences. You don't find that in the field of contemporary music, because it feels like an ivory tower. Specialists can see a huge difference between aleatoric music by John Cage and serial music by Pierre Boulez, but most people, even educated people, cannot. If you see a Tarkovsky film, it's high-level art, very sophisticated, but still understandable for hundreds of thousands of people. Why should composers be less accessible than Tarkovsky?

### *And this has happened because composers have shut themselves off in a closed society?*

I think they started to believe in systems, and forgot that music is not about systems, but about communication. They swear by dedecaphony, or serial technique,



or spectral technique, and forget about music being an exchange of ideas with other people. I'm not against this music, I listen to it a lot and I've learned a lot from it. But I want to communicate.

*And where in all this do you ultimately see yourself?*

I'm just now starting to assess my work as a composer, so it's hard to say. To return to an earlier point in our conversation, I may end up like Wagner, with instrumental music that is irrelevant, a total creature of the theater. But I wouldn't like that, and hope to keep my output in good balance.

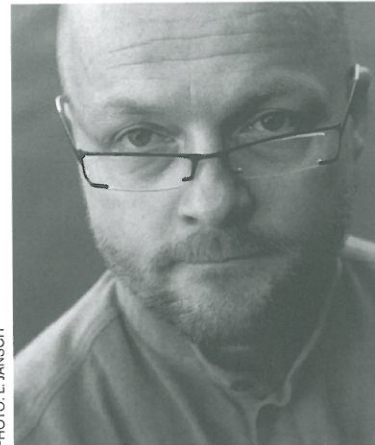


PHOTO: L. JANSCH

Born in 1965, **Aleš Březina** studied violin at the Pilsen Conservatoire and musicology at universities in Prague, Basel and Berlin. He has composed music for more than 20 films directed by Jan Hřebejk, Petr Zelenka, Jiří Menzel, Dagmar Knöpfel, Olga Sommerová and others. He was twice nominated for the Czech Lion Award, and his music for Hřebejk's film *Kawasaki's Rose* earned him a nomination for the 2010 European Film Composer Award. In collaboration with librettist and stage director Jiří Nekvasil he created *Tomorrow There Will Be...*, a chamber opera for Czech mezzo Soňa Červená. From its premiere in April 2008 through June 2013, it achieved 86 sold-out performances in Prague. It also won the 2008 Alfréd Radok Award for Best Music. Since September 2013, the National Theater has been staging Březina's second chamber opera *Toufar*, which also features Soňa Červená. Březina won his second Alfréd Radok Award in 2010 for his music for Karel Čapek's drama *The Makropulos Affair*, staged by

Robert Wilson at the National Theater. In 2012 his music for the National Theater production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* was also nominated for an Alfréd Radok Award. Other notable theater work includes the multimedia piece *Mucha's Slav Epic* (libretto Šimon Caban), which premiered at the Municipal Theatre in Brno in 2010; music for a production of Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* which premiered at the National Theater in Prague in 2012; and music for the Robert Wilson production *1914*, which premiered at the National Theater in Prague in 2014. His instrumental works include *Falling Leaves for piano and orchestra*, *Agnus dei for three countertenors and string quintet*, *Piano Trio 333*, the piano cycle *Reperkuse*, and several versions of a *Requiem* originally composed for children's choir and small ensemble. Since 1994 he has been the Director of the Bohuslav Martinů Institute in Prague. As Chairman of the Editorial Board of the Bohuslav Martinů Complete Critical Edition, he has prepared a host of compositions by the composer for revised or urtext publications at Czech, German, English, Austrian and French publishing houses. He reconstructed the original version of Martinů's opera *The Greek Passion*, which premiered at the Bregenzer Festspiele in 1999 in a co-production with the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, and in 2000 won the Laurence Olivier Award. He has published studies of 20th century music in Czech and foreign journals, and is the editor of the ongoing series "Martinů Studies" (published by Peter Lang Bern, three volumes to date).

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## CZECH PHILHARMONIC

### A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO THE NEW WORLD



PHOTO: CHRIS LEE, CARNEGIE HALL

**How does Czech Philharmonic General Manager Robert Hanč feel about the orchestra's first tour of the United States in six years?**  
**"I'm not sure how to say it, but I think I'm happy," he says. "And my colleagues are happy, too."**

His hesitation is understandable. Hanč was not with the orchestra when it toured the US in 2008, but the legacy of that tour lingers: a no-name conductor, cranky musicians taking long, arduous bus rides to B- and C-list halls, big financial losses. "It was problematic," Hanč admits. "So we were a little worried. We didn't know how this one would go." As it turned out, it went splendidly. Hanč and orchestra Executive Director David Mareček put together an 11-date tour of the US in November that made