

## A Tale of Music Festivals, Money, and Redemption

*An interview with Thomas Sovík*

*In November and December 2018 the University of North Texas, in cooperation with the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts and Palacký University Olomouc, will host its 3rd International Festival of Czech Music. How is it that this institution became the centre for Czech music in the United States when, at the beginning, its architect was nearly fired from his faculty appointment for suggesting such a cooperation with Czech schools of music? Vilem Spilka, head of Jazz Studies at the Janáček Academy of Music & Performing Arts, Brno, interviews professor Thomas Sovík. Thomas, before we speak about the festival, perhaps it could be interesting for our readers to know something about the resistance put up by your university against working with Czech institutions.*

In 1990, after I completed my dissertation on the musical treatises of Jan Blahoslav (1558) and Jan Josquin (1561), I came to Brno to speak at a musicological conference at the Janáček Academy. I was quite the innocent assistant professor at the time, and it seemed to me perfectly logical to visit the rector's office and suggest that there might be some benefit in discussing an exchange of students between JAMU and UNT. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats at my own university were quite upset when they heard about it. I received a letter of reprimand in my permanent file for taking such an initiative, because I had no authority to even suggest such a cooperation without their approval.

*And yet you continued?*

At first the situation became even more perilous. The following year, I returned to Brno with a small group of students to offer some performances. Also in the group was the Dean of Music at the time, who accompanied us to investigate this embarrassing situation. He didn't like it at all; in fact, his report to the university president made it clear that any type formal engagement with Brno, which he perceived to be a small and unimportant "village", would have no benefit whatsoever for our institution.

*And...?*

But I simply ignored the bureaucrats. That's the easiest way to explain it. I suppose I can say that I've earned my reputation for being a pain in the ass of the university. All the time I was taking groups

of music students to Brno and Olomouc for performances, flying “under the radar” of the bureaucrats. And I survived for twenty eight more years to become not only the senior faculty member in musicology and music theory but also the Director of Central European Studies & Exchanges.

***What was the reason for the initial resistance to establishing connections with the Czech Republic? Was it because Czechs were so unknown to your university?***

Not even university bureaucrats were unaware of the number of Czechs in Texas. The Czech language is the third most-spoken language in the State of Texas. We have more than 140 SPJST lodges (Slovanská podporující jednota státu Texas - Slav Support Group of Texas) in addition to the organisations of the KJT (Katolická jednota texaská - Texan Catholic Unity) and KJZT [Česko-římská katolická podporující jednota žen texaských - Czech-Roman Catholic

Support Unity of Texan Women), and we have fourteen chapters of a Czech Historical Society. There is a Czech Heritage Museum in Temple, another one in Fayetteville, a Czech Cultural Center in Houston, and a Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center in LaGrange.

We have two newspapers published entirely in Czech, *Našinec* (weekly) and *Hospodář* (monthly). Two other newspapers, *Věstník* and the *Brethren Journal*, are a mixture of Czech and English, and a peer-reviewed academic journal, *Kosmas: Czechoslovak and Central European Journal*, based at Texas A&M University, is published under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Society of Arts & Sciences.

***So how did this situation progress from a prohibited activity to your university now being the centre of Czech music in the US?***

As it happens, it was a miracle. We have a great many Czech organisations in Texas, but we say





*New staging of Coronide by Vít Zouhar*

“three Czechs, four committees, five arguments.” Each group is largely independent of one another except for a state-wide organization called the Czech Educational Foundation of Texas, which is dedicated to preserving Czech culture.

CEFT was looking for a new project, something beyond supporting Czech-language instruction. They had been watching, silently I suppose, while the crazy Czech-American professor was building so many relationships in the Czech Republic. And when the organization decided to move on to its next project, it called the university to offer an initial \$600,000 to support studies in Czech music at our university.

***You received \$600,000 to support Czech music without even asking for it?***

Unbelievable, isn't it? Musicians usually have to resort to begging. And since that time, our endowment has grown to over two million dollars, and there is the possibility that CEFT will help us build the endowment to ten million.

***And the university's response?***

Once the university bureaucrats caught the scent of money, the crazy professor who had been making

these visits to Brno and Olomouc and so many other places was no longer the lunatic. And, most important of all, we have a new Dean of Music, Prof. John Richmond, who is a fantastic colleague and a great supporter of Czech music.

***Could you give us some specific examples of what you've been doing since you were first contacted by the Czech Foundation?***

Between the time of my reprimand and this visit to Brno in September 2018 - during which our opera singers will receive language coaching at the Janáček Academy to perform *Přítomdy lišky Bystroušky* (*The Cunning Little Vixen*), I've led 36 student visits to the Czech Republic and we've had multiple student exchanges with the Janáček Academy.

Our short-term visitors from the Czech Republic have included composers Jindřich Feld, Ivo Medek, and Arnošt Parsch, and flautist Arnošt Bourek. In 2006 we hosted a residency of the Wallinger Quartet, followed by the Petr Mička cimbalom orchestra and then, the following year, Radoslav Kvapil came over as our resident artist. In 2010 we produced Smetana's opera *Prodaná nevěsta* (*The Bartered Bride*) - in Czech - with performances both

on campus as well as across the state of Texas. In 2012, 2013, and 2017 we sponsored Texas-wide tours of the Czech *dechovka* (wind band) Stříbrňanka, with the Škampa Quartet coming somewhere in the middle. I suppose I've lost track.

### *And the international festivals?*

In 2013 we produced a two-continent music festival dedicated to Leoš Janáček, which included a production of *Zápisník zmizelého* (*The Diary of One Who Disappeared*); two years later we produced a similar festival with the *Česká mše vánoční* (*Czech Christmas Mass*) as our keynote work. In both instances, we followed the on-campus festival with performances in nine cities. Our third festival will be to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia.

### *Can you say who will be invited from the Czech Republic to participate in this year's festival?*

In addition to performances by our own university soloists and our UNT Baroque Orchestra &

Collegium Singers, we know that Sára Medková will perform the Dvořák *Piano Concerto*, on the second night we will produce the comic-love opera *Coronide* by Vít Zouhar; there will be a multimedia performance by Ivo Medek, Sára Medková, and Vít Zouhar which somehow involves frying an egg (!), and the keynote work of the festival will be our production of Janáček's *Bystrouška* that will include small children from the Dallas Czech School, who will be on stage as little foxes.

Our keynote speakers will be Prof. Jaroslav Miller, Rector of Palacký University (the significance of 1918) and Fr. Jaroslav Křivánek, Pastor of the Hussite Church in Olomouc (the history of the Czech Hussite Church).

And then, on the one day following the on-campus part of the festival and the beginning of our performance tour of *Bystrouška* to multiple cities, Fr. Křivánek and his wife Jitka will lead a sing-along of Czech Christmas carols in the Czech Catholic Church in Praha, Texas.

It will certainly be a busy but interesting time!

[czech.music.unt.edu](http://czech.music.unt.edu)

# Contempuls Night

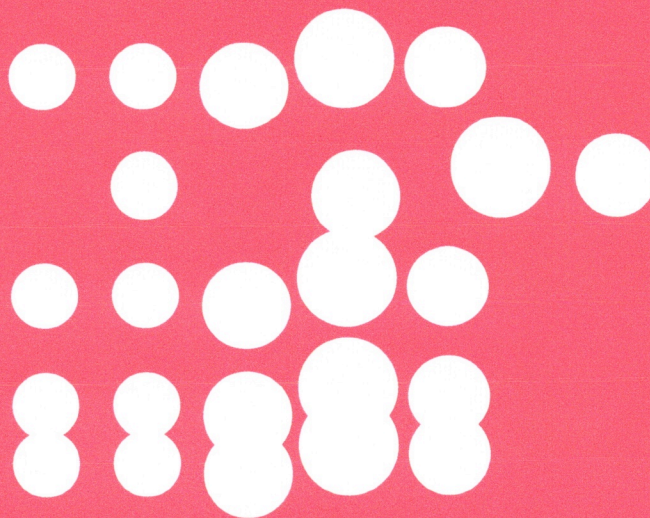
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