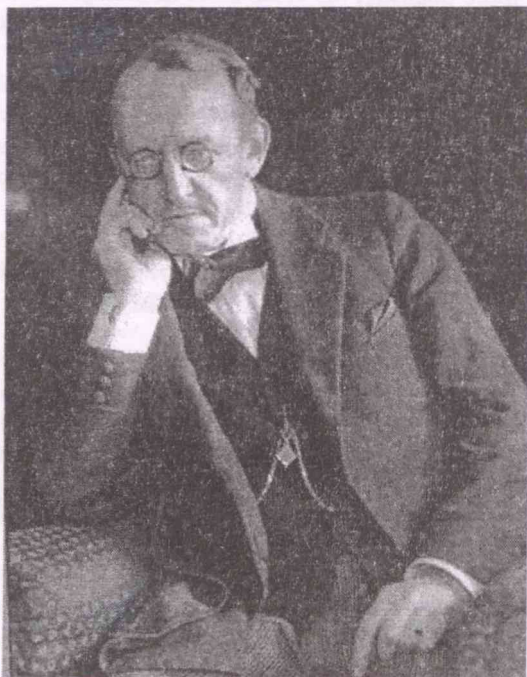


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## EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF VITEZSLAV NOVAK IN THE LIGHT OF MEMORIES OF HIS PUPILS AND COLLEAGUES

This year we remind the 60th anniversary of the death of Vitezslav Novak (1870–1949), the famous Czech composer, pianist, collector of folk songs and – not least – the music teacher.



*Vitezslav Novak*

In addition to compositional activity teaching was an important part of his life: education of future composers. With hindsight it is obvious to what extent Novak has influenced the Czech, Slovak, and foreign musical culture, both indirectly – through its compositions, both directly – by his educational

work. Novak's largest educational credit is attributed to both the official teaching in master classes of the Prague Conservatory (more than thirty years: 1909-1940), both his private lessons, which reputation has been a great ticket into the ranks of the teaching staff of that conservatory. What methodology Novak applied, when he was a teacher? The only objective statements can be the Novak's autobiographical records, memories of his students and colleagues and indirectly work and professional success of his graduates.

How did Novak participate in the Master school to prepare the future composers?

He taught the composition there, including the following subjects: Applied theory of music forms, Instrumentation and Playing the scores.

First lesson of composition Novak began with harmonizing selected fugues from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (see Moyzes, p. 676), or folk songs (HABA, 1926, p. 64). And he usually used to sit down at the piano and played some of his harmonic improvisation, which had illuminated more than wordier explanations. Later he assigned the comparative tasks: e.g. to compare the construction of analogous pairs of preludes and fugues from the 1st and 2nd series of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* or continuously connect two Chopin's mazurkas using their characteristic motifs; his speciality was a requirement to set up a figured chant (KUBAN, p. 7). Subsequently, he selected examples of orchestration of classical and modern musical literature – from Beethoven to Debussy's sonatas *Children's Corner* (MOYZES, p. 676). He served brief but very clear instructions on how to remove compositional shortcomings. His compositional lectures had always led to modify or change the settled habits of students to revive the compositions with more progressive thinking. "Desire for invention was the fundamental teacher's moment for Vitezslav Novak." (HABA, 1970, p.1)

The Novak's teaching concept was based on three focal points:

1. Playing the compositions, revision of them, discussion
2. Analysis of classic compositions (from Bach to newer music)
3. Preparation for composing of symphonic and chamber concerts.

Before each concert of Czech Philharmonic Orchestra Novak was discussing with his students about compositions that were on the program. The preparation for students on what they can hear in concert halls was considered by Alois Haba, one of his many pupils, as one of the best Novak's educational practices (HABA, 1970, p. 2).

In the lessons of formal analysis, where Novak (as usual) required detailed knowledge, students analysed the essential and typical works from J. S. Bach (Well-Tempered Clavier), through W.A. Mozart (Symphony No. 39 E-flat major, No. 40 in G minor, No. 41 C major "Jupiter") and L. van Beethoven (sonatas, all the symphonies, some quartets and concerts) to F. Liszt (Faust Symphony) there. At each occasion, Novak has always paid attention to the logical development of musical thinking in the context of the time.

At the very lessons of composition, first of all, there was played the created composition. If students did not sufficiently manage to play the piano, then Novak realized the interpretation himself. Subsequently the composition was analyzed and re-played several times. If the harmonic plan was illogical or otherwise confused, then Novak recommended: "Here you could ... It could be ... "(HABA, 1970, p. 2) – he never commanded or imposed. He allowed the freer development of creative abilities of his pupils and pointed to the idea of variability.

In melody lessons he taught the proportional tectonics and construction of climax there. He educated through the classic examples and referred to the model of Czech composer tradition (with Smetana, Dvorak, as well as Janacek). He conquered also other authors with a critical view (e.g. Debussy), "the climax could also be somewhere else" (HABA, 1970, p. 3).

About harmony lessons Haba states that Novak mostly harmonized one bar by one chord stroke. He held the classical principle here: to construct a base for a harmonious melody, while also to work with transitive chords on quarter or eighth note. He demonstrated the harmonic rules on numerous examples – he showed how the chord plan can beautifully go along with the melody on Max Reger's harmony. He taught how to join a melodic course with a harmonic one, the co-ordination of melody and harmony (showing how melodic progress can be faster than a harmonic one and vice versa).

Novak taught the polyphony especially through the practical examples (e.g. he pointed out the Dvorak's homophonic composition with good descant "from nothing", the Dvorak's art of sudden recovery with small unexpected changes that were not explicitly polyphonic forms). Novak frequently provided examples of his own work (e.g. he showed that in addition to occasional harmonic Dvorak's "fills" he applies more real voices, conceived voices etc.), but not as a model to emulate, but as a methodical means of the educational problem (Novak did not like when someone markedly imitated his style - see KUBAN, p. 6).

Novak had a great knowledge of the classic music works and had a refined taste. He himself made aesthetic judgments only after the rigorous analysis of the work and also led his students to do in the same way. Only

that judgement could be objective and valid universally. He paid attention to the compositional and formal divergences and other technical anomalies, pointing to the variability of the structure. He argued that musical forms are standards that you can change by purpose (e.g. he showed above 40 examples of Bach's obvious parallel quints, examples of Mozart's sonatas in broken forms, etc.). For Novak loved to modify the classical forms in his compositions with an effort to invent harmonic or formal neologism (HABA, 1970, p. 4). He liked to work with openness and allowed his pupils to compose in subjective self-expression way.

Many of his students have agreed that Novak, in his educational activities, put emphasis on a rigor and consistency in corrections. "In Novak's lessons we often struggled with semitones: i.e. which one should be placed in melody (e.g. g or g-sharp). He taught us the sense of refined musical form for the gradation of the climax etc. This synthesis – the dynamism and stabilized shape – was for us the real novelty in Novak's lessons." (HABA, 1970, p. 5). Novak's lessons were universal in the sense that composers could do well anywhere in the world.

Ilja Hurnik, in memories on his teacher, writes about the Novak's promotion of creative freedom in his teaching from the side of future composers, but he immediately adds that Novak however required a large responsibility for their results. Hurnik also attests Novak's "teaching deception" when Novak pretended that composition is only the craft, that students can manage. He made no distinction between the talent and diligence. That is why Novak understood the mistakes of pupils as sins or guilts. "If a pupil brought no very bearing theme of fugue, then Novak clearly indicated that it could go differently and better. But if a pupil drowned the second flute at the point where it could be heard, then Novak shouted – because it was sinful to produce unnecessary tones. To follow Novak meant to follow generally applicable instructions and eternal music." (HURNIK, p. 1)

As already mentioned, Novak did not command but he only recommended. However, if he found a mistake, he made clear his disagreement immediately often with a humorous or ironic remark. He required an orthographic accuracy. His colleague Karel Hoffmeister, in this context, recalls the time when Novak assessed his songs and immediately discovered the enharmonic confusion, or when Novak corrected the mistake with a similar problem with the addendum "Helo" instead of correct "Hello" and remarked "That note you wrote" (HOFFMEISTER, p. 22-23).

There are some examples of Novak's objections: "The main theme has the monotonous line and the harmonious background too; the main key was abandoned too soon; there is not the diversity in the repetition of the motif;

you have used the conventional method; the sequence does not satisfy the requirement of a perfect motif work; the dynamic line is fragmented; all lower voices are harshly covered; unnecessary delay; the back modulation is not clear enough; incomplete end." (STEPAN, p. 518). Then he usually toned down his conclusion: "On the whole, this does have the mood – one passage is quite nice, if you want, you can remake your work or write something like in that style." (Ibid.). Novak had a special note for each problematic point in the score, accurate and effective one.

Novak also latently taught outside his teaching locations, whenever he talked about his new sketches, his works or ones of other composers in a circle of his friends or at regular discussions after concerts. He did so by more notes, somewhat clipped, never rolling, but how Hoffmeister says "... a perfectly brief, clear and precise as algebraic formulas - that threw the light on the interpretation of his work." (see HOFFMEISTER, p. 28). Hoffmeister sees the Novak's main composition philosophy in a rational grasp of musical ideas.

Interesting testimony about Novak's piano pedagogy we can find at reports of Marie Tarantova, which was probably his last pupil (when we do not take his son into account), who Novak privately prepared for state examination at conservatory in the years 1910-16. As known, during his studies Novak financially helped himself by private piano lessons (later private lessons of the music-theoretical subjects). Novak's piano professor Josef Jiranek states in his memoirs that Novak's decision to study at the conservatory besides the composition (1889-92 A. Dvorak, K. Bendl 1894-95) also the piano playing (1891-96) had also practical and existential reasons – i.e. the initial uncertainty of future career of composer (see JIRANEK in SRBA (ed.), p. 327; HOLZKNECHT, p. 14; HOFFMEISTER, p. 14).

When Novak taught the piano playing during his student years, what kind of teacher he was?

From the perspective of Tarantova Novak primarily became her "art" teacher– another teacher (Marie M. Binkova) had to teach her the technical aspects of play. The only etudes, in Novak's lessons were ones of Ignaz Moscheles, op. 70.

What was a typical lesson like? At the beginning Bach or Händel, sometime Scarlatti, Corelli etc. were on the program. Tarantova played all the Inventions, Suites and Partitas of J. S. Bach. Later she played the Bach's Well Tempered Clavier in this phase of lesson. The second part of the lesson was devoted to Haydn's sonatas, Dusík, Mozart and Beethoven. The end of the lesson was reserved for Romantics (Schubert, K. Maria von Weber, Reger, Brahms, Emanuel Chabrier). It is interesting that Novak did not require

the play by heart. (TARANTOVA. p. 2). The rhythm was cultivated on slow parts of Haydn's sonatas, Schumann and Chopin – Novak himself patiently explained and played with a feeling performance. As Tarantova writes, of all romantic composers Novak most loved Schubert, his rich source of melodies (by the way, a large portrait of Schubert hung on the wall in his office). In 1940 Novak answered the inquiry for Czech magazine called Zdroj (Source) *Which composer is closest to you...*: "Of the old classics it is certainly Bach. Of the Viennese classics it is Beethoven, I do not share the hyper-cult of Mozart. Of the romantics it is Franz Schubert, who I consider as the greatest musical phenomenon. Of the new-romantics I prefer Berlioz." (Zdroj, 25 11. 1940, No. 39, p. 325). Jan Ladislav Dusik was another his favourite composer at that time, whom Novak was already trying to rehabilitate.

Novak always played excerpts from what he recommended for playing. Tarantova remembers how he played Debussy with the great passion, at the time of his fascination by impressionism, than he later took a more critical stance to it. Studying piano playing with Novak meant learning the history of music, forms and analyzing songs (especially sonata form).

Later Tarantova was played Vivaldi violin concertos for harpsichord in the adaptation of J. S. Bach where was fusion of the Bach's progressive polyphony with the homophonic style of Italian composer. So it led to the recognition of form and instrumentation of concert: playing tutti, solo parts or concerto cadenza in different ways.

In the third year a harmony was added– Novak's interpretation has always been brief, but pithy and clear. In a few minutes he appeared parallel quints and octaves in student's exercises, which the author had to think over carefully, correct and rewrite to the next week.

From above mentioned we can see a coherent concept and Novak's excellent teaching skill.

Though Novak himself, according to his own words and testimony of others, was no virtuous pianist, he was an excellent player at sight and had a strange, exquisite sense of feeling concept of the pieces, creating the perfect impression with a colour tone. As a pianist he mostly interested in the overall logically built construction of the work.

Vitezslav Novak himself in all modesty did not speak much about his teaching activities, his teaching methods, but in his memoirs can be traced he was very close to his teacher and friend, Antonin Dvorak, followed in many respects, especially by his rigorous approach. Novak directly appreciated that Dvorak's view is evidently applied in his lessons, namely identifying errors and correcting them as a wise educational method (Novak, p. 43).

However, he often referred to Dvorak's purity of harmonic work during his teaching. We can say that Novak was a strict teacher as well as Dvorak.

Novak often inclined to humour and irony during teaching. Every joke, however, had its purpose, either it clarified or warned (see SRBA (ed.), p. 346, 378), as the majority of his students had given evidence (R. Vesely, J. Jindrich, B. Vomacka, V. Stepan, E. Hradecky ad.). The Sharp wit could interpret the situation so well that his students had remembered it well henceforth. Novak's humour and wit, including self-irony was one of the motivational and explanatory devices.

He did not require a recitation of rules and exceptions; virtually he pushed students to study harmony, not a doctrine. In harmony he combined traditional theory with the most modern approaches there (Hugo Riemann, Salomon Jadassohn). He started with the easy harmonization of melodies, led to a sophisticated and fluent counterpoint. Novak refused the emptiness of harmony as well as artificiality. In the work of his students (even in the works of other authors) he hated hoariness, flatness, inability or superficiality and imperfection.

As already mentioned, in the practical composition the students were encouraged to be independent and have considerable creative freedom there - but when Novak had found an error, he had asked if the student knew about that: "If you take it intentionally, knowingly, and you like it, then we do not consider it as a mistake." (in JINDRICH in SRBA (ed.), p. 379) - otherwise he had offered other, better solutions in order to preserve the individuality of expression of his pupils (see HRADECKY, p. 130). Jindrich Jindrich writes about dizzying, riveting power of Novak's harmonic inventiveness (in JINDRICH in SRBA (ed.), p. 380). Stepan mentions Novak's extraordinary knowledge of the world's music production, when he reminded harmony examples or instrumentation from larger works of Czech and world composers from his memory.

Personality of educator is always closely linked to the personal traits of human - his intelligence, character, temperament and many other factors. Teaching of Vitezslav Novak intertwined his personality of the original composer, an erudite scholar and systematist, a philosopher, humorist, glossarist and - last but not least - the kind and fair man. In the course of time it is evident how Novak's composer school was invaluable merit in the development of Czech (and not only Czech) modern artistic music.

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