

**Jan Vičar, *Imprints: Essays on Czech Music and Aesthetics*. Togga, Prague: Palacký University in Olomouc, 2005. 251 pp. ISBN: 80-244-0989-5**

At first reading, Jan Vičar's *Imprints: Essays on Czech Music and Aesthetics* appears to be the oddest collection of ten studies penned over the course of two decades, accompanied by a CD of 20 examples to illustrate those essays . . . plus an interview. The content of *Imprints* is both fish and fowl in that the language and the level of discourse in the various articles target readers from the music dilettante to the most sophisticated musicologist, and the work capstones with a seemingly out-of-place interview with American composer George Crumb. That having been said, *Imprints* unfolds much like the opening of a Bach fugue or a symphony from the quill of Mozart or Beethoven; the work begins with an innocent simplicity, and then it unfolds before us as a garden of roses coming to bloom.

Written on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, "Music Against the War" opens with a question that we, as musicians, have asked ourselves throughout history: Can music make a difference? In this essay, Prof. Vičar shows us how Czech musicians – from those in exile to those at Terezín and other camps – have used art to inspire, to create a sense of community, to create a place for retreat in the darkest of times, and even as a weapon-of-the-soul to strike out against unimaginable horror and despair. As just one poignant example, Prof. Vičar retells the story of the camp orchestra at Dachau performing a piece especially composed for the visit of Reich-Minister Heinrich Himmler . . . based on the tune *polibte nám prdel* (kiss our asses).

It was not the Second World War, of course, that first forced Czechs to flee across the borders. For centuries, religious, political, and economic reasons have forced Czech composers and musicians to emigrate. Historically, Czech musicology has viewed this drain of the country's artistic elite as detrimental. Prof. Vičar, however, offers us quite another view. In his second essay, "Echoes of Czech Music in America," he argues that these musicians, and especially those musicians who came to the Americas (beginning with the Moravians who settled in Pennsylvania and North Carolina in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), had "lost their home but gained the world." Indeed, today, the works of Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, Martinů, Husa, and Feld have become mainstays on the repertoire lists of opera houses and orchestras not only in America, but throughout the world. To further our understanding of how and *why* Czech music has become so "globalized" and how, in particular, it has become so ingrained into the musical fabric of the United States, Prof. Vičar outlines seven topic areas for discussion. Each of these might provide a framework for its own academic conference in days to come, or render a long list of possible dissertation topics for scholars interested in how the music of so small a country (literally) could enjoy such monumental significance.

Prof. Vičar then proceeds to give us an overview of "Unknown Czech Music after 1945" – the astounding number of Czech opera houses, orchestras, chamber groups, and music schools vis-à-vis a relatively small population, and a long list of Czech musicians born during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who would then mature to capture foreign attention. Particularly interesting are Prof. Vičar's observations of why Czech music post-1945 received less (world) attention than music coming out its sister-countries of Poland and Hungary.

One of the composers discussed in the third essay (and by now the reader can easily see that these studies progress from one to another in a logical fashion) is the subject of the fourth, “The Film Music of Václav Trojan.” Here we have a substantial discussion of the professional collaboration between Trojan and the “Walt Disney of the East” Jiří Trnka, Czech puppet maker and film director well known for his stop-motion puppet animations.

The next two essays, which together comprise just less than half of the entire content of *Imprints*, are masterful “theoretical” analyses. Approaching two music compositions from different perspectives (and being of perhaps limited interest to the non-musician), each analysis is a treasure-trove of historical and technical details for the serious musician who wants to know what makes this music “tick.” “Leoš Janáček’s *Diary of One Who Disappeared*” is largely a study of the composer’s speech-melody principles; this is followed by a wildly detailed analysis of the scales, motives, harmonies, rhythmic meters, and instrumentation employed by Janáček in *Taras Bulba*.

The next three essays, which relate to the practice of “aesthetic” analysis and to peering into the *soul* of music, form yet another small content unit within the larger context of *Imprints*. In “Contemplations on Zdeněk Fibich’s *Poem*,” Prof. Vičar poses 21 questions that may be, in fact, the questions that the theorist *should* ask before dissecting a manuscript as if it were a slab of pork on the butcher’s table and then proudly proclaiming that he “knows” the music. Rather, Prof. Vičar directs us to significant, but difficult-to-answer, questions: Is this composition *beautiful*? . . . Is this composition *good*? . . . What properties of my auditory organ enable me to register, recognize, and understand all the musical facts? Music theory, as an academic discipline within in the university curriculum, often exists for its own sake. Too often, music theory assumes that *all* music is worth our effort to understand its essence; too infrequently, music theory has demonstrated the courage to ask the obvious question – “who cares?” The second essay of this internal series, “The Subject, Methods, and Significance of Aesthetics,” leads us to questions of *how* human beings perceive “beauty,” and to *how* composers subsequently create art “according to the laws of beauty.” Finally, an “Essay on Music Criticism” completes this series with a discussion of how one might examine and evaluate music (both the music itself and its performance) according to both objective and subjective criteria, and of the qualifications appropriate for the music critic.

As a conclusion to his collection of essays, Prof. Vičar takes us on a round-the-world overview of “European Classical Music in Today’s World.” Interesting as this may be, perhaps the reader will be most fascinated with the author’s look to the future in the coda of this study. To be sure, certain music *has* become immortalized and it doesn’t appear that we will run short of new interpretations of “the classical” in the foreseeable future. But the real question is this: How should we approach the musics that are just around the corner when each may have “a *new* context, *new* style, and a *new* aesthetic”?

Which then, finally, brings us to Prof. Vičar’s interview with George Crumb, an American composer of the modern and the *avant garde*. The inclusion of the interview seems totally out of place at first blush but, in fact, it provides a perfectly logical conclusion. It is one composer’s view of where music has been, how it is made and how it goes about itself, how it should be perceived and evaluated, and where – as an art – music might find itself in the morning.

Prof. Jan Vičar, an active composer and musicologist holding professorship at the Faculty of Music of the Academy of Performing Arts (Prague) while simultaneously chairing the Department of Musicology at Palacký University (Olomouc), has given us a unique glimpse into the mind of the musician. Indeed, artist-types are typically known for being a bit odd. Simple questions are “imprinted” in our memory to become nagging career-long pursuits, relationships of all kinds and colors are continually imagined and tested, and new paths arise from our students asking us to explain ourselves. We are forever drinking coffee with our colleagues as an excuse to argue about how “this” either absolutely does relate, or most certainly does not *and could not ever in any way possible* relate, to “that.” We begin by asking “can music make a difference?”; we then spend a lifetime listening to music, dissecting music, arguing about music, playing music, and even writing our own new music to throw into the circle. At the end, we think it is a totally rational act to begin the process anew as we look at old questions with new eyes. Perhaps this is Prof. Vičar’s greatest gift to us with his *Imprints*; in the finest tradition of the academic community, he shows us what it means to *question*, to *think*, to *reason*, and to *wonder*. In short, Prof. Vičar shows us what it means to be a university scholar.

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