

Jan Charypar: Reception of Josef Suk's Orchestral Works

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I am going to speak about the reception of the orchestral works by Josef Suk, the pupil and son-in-law of Antonín Dvořák. At first, I will shortly describe the progression of Suk's work, and then I will speak about the critical reflections of Suk's orchestral works during his lifetime. Then I will focus on the problems of reception of Suk's later works, and I will conclude with the issues of the reception of Suk's orchestral works after his death, the reception abroad, and the contemporary situation.

Suk's works are divided into two periods which are stylistically very different, and consequently, their reception is different, too. It is generally known that in the first period, Suk follows Antonín Dvořák. Of course, it's a simplification, because although there was an obvious Dvořák's influence in Suk's early style, Suk's way of composition was in many respects different. Suk is usually, and I think rightly, characterized as essentially lyrical composer with extraordinary sense of orchestral colours. After his well-known *Serenade for Strings*, it was particularly the incidental music to Julius Zeyer's plays *Radúz and Mahulena* and *Under the Apple Tree*, which determined the specific nature and lyricism of Suk's music. The second period of his work began at the time of death of Antonín Dvořák and Suk's wife Otilie one year later. These tragic events in Suk's family influenced deeply the nature and content of his music. Simultaneously, Suk started to be inspired by new impulses of the modern styles of that time, represented by Richard Strauss, Claude Debussy, young Schönberg, Mahler etc. As a result of these circumstances, Suk's music became gradually much more complicated, expressive and meditative than before, and Suk became one of the most progressive Czech composers of the early 20th century. This period of his work is represented particularly by four large symphonic works - *Asrael*, *A Summer's Tale*, *Ripening*, and *Epilogue*.

The critical reflections of Suk's works in 1890s were very positive – young Suk was praised for his melodic inventiveness, technical skilfulness, colourful orchestration, and sense of poetic moodiness. In the first decade of his orchestral composing, there was no negative critical reflection of him. His incidental music to Julius Zeyer's plays even impressed critics by the dramatic gifts that aroused hope that Suk would eventually become a successful opera composer (which never came true, however, because he never composed any opera). Works such as *Violin Fantasy in G minor*, the *Asrael* symphony or *A Summer's Tale* brought him a reputation of one of the leading persons in modern Czech music. The main periodicals, such as *Dalibor* or *Hudební revue*, assembled numerous Suk's enthusiastic followers that commented on his great progression with keen interest. There were many

of them, for example Emanuel Chvála, Karel Hoffmeister, Jaromír Borecký, Otakar Šourek, later Václav Štěpán etc. During Suk's lifetime, most of the Czech critics praised the whole Suk's work. However, there were some critics who refused at least the works of his later period. It's necessary to mention that most of them belonged to the special stream of Czech musical criticism that came from the Charles University.

We can say that the main cause of this special critical ideology was strong influence of Otakar Hostinský at the university. His most enthusiastic follower was Zdeněk Nejedlý, a legendary controversial figure of Czech musicology. Nejedlý followed Hostinský's idea of Smetana's progressiveness in opposition to Dvořák's conservatism, but he substantially radicalized this idea, because according to Nejedlý, Dvořák was a reactionary author who founded a conservative school that returned Czech music to the outdated aesthetics. In 1910, Nejedlý and his followers founded a new periodical called *Smetana*, in which they intended to fight for allegedly Smetanian progressive stream of Czech music, represented by Fibich, Foerster, and Ostrčil, and against Dvořák and Suk as allegedly officially favoured and too influential reactionary composers.

Nejedlý and others, e.g. Vladimír Helfert, Karel Boleslav Jiráček, and Josef Bartoš attacked harshly both Dvořák and Suk, and later Janáček. They claimed that Suk was a conservative and naturalistic, completely superficial artist which only fascinated audience with his technical skilfulness and orchestral colours, and which tried unsuccessfully to be modern because he just created unnatural and bizarre expression without any idea, they said. It's true that most of Suk's opponents during his lifetime were Nejedlý's followers, although we can find also someone who refused especially Suk's later works but didn't belong to Nejedlý's group. However, most of the Czech critics of the time, on the contrary, praised highly Suk's late works as well as the earlier works and the progressiveness, and extraordinary philosophical and psychological profundity of his works.

In 1920s, the situation changed, because the new European streams that came to Bohemia were anti-Romantic, e.g. Stravinsky, Neoclassicism, music of Les Six from Paris etc. The thinking of that time was completely different than before, Romanticism was already regarded as outdated. Nejedlý's concept of musical progress wasn't up-to-date anymore in this new era, and former members of his group developed independently of his opinions. Vladimír Helfert and Karel Boleslav Jiráček completely changed their opinions on Dvořák, Suk, and Janáček. Helfert even suggested Suk for the honorary doctorate of Masaryk University in Brno. Despite the new thinking in music and critics, Suk gained more and more followers among Czech critics and musicians, and his reputation reached its peak, especially after the premieres of the symphonic compositions *Ripening* and *Epilogue*, which were highly glorified. In the Czech critics, Suk had a reputation of an extraordinary artistic philosopher,

master of modern polyphony, orchestration, harmony, and form, truly top composer, and this common opinion of him didn't change till the end of his life.

A bit different problem is the reception of Suk's works after his death and their reception abroad. Suk's earlier works, such as *Serenade for Strings*, *Fairy Tale*, *Violin fantasy* and also *Asrael Symphony*, are a standard part of Czech repertoire. The special problem is the reception of Suk's later works, i.e. the works composed after the *Asrael* symphony. As I have already said, after the death of Dvořák and of Suk's wife Otilie, Suk's music became much more complex. At this point, I can use the findings from my thesis about Suk's Second String Quartet which is very typical composition of that period of Suk's work. Suk developed a style in which he gradually used very complex compositional techniques inspired by means of the music of the early 20th century. The aesthetics of his music remained late Romantic, though. The complexity and expressivity of his late Romanticism were more and more difficult for the audience, and Suk's last large work, *Epilogue*, which was composed during 13 years, is really the peak of this difficulty. If we read the reviews written after Suk's death, we can find in them admiration for Suk's extraordinary artistic level which ranks him truly among the top Czech composers. On the other hand, in some of the reviews, there is also scepticism about the possible success with the audience. Some critics, for example Václav Holzknecht in his review on the Second Quartet, said with somewhat pejorative connotation that this style was typical of the period in art for which the term Secession is often used. We can read in those critical reflections that Suk's late style was hypersensitive, hyper-Romantic, extremely subjective, and that it was an example of the utmost limits of the late Romanticism. Of course, we need to understand such terms in the context of the time when those reviews were written. But the general problem that the criticism pointed out was the fact that to a large part of the audience, the intelligibility of Suk's late style is limited.

In my opinion, one of the key problems is that the complicated and monumental Romanticism of Suk's late works was already outdated abroad at the time when Czech composers tried to spread it there, because that was already the time of *Le Six*, dodecaphony, Neoclassicism etc., when the common thinking was anti-Romantic. It's obvious e.g. from the foreign reviews of the symphonic poem *Ripening* in 1924 (at the international music festival in Prague). Another problem appears when we read some of the elder significant publications of western musicology, such as *The Oxford History of Western Music* – the problem that Suk, as well as Vítězslav Novák, was little known in the Western Europe, because the information we can read about Suk in those publications is often very poor and simplistic. Unfortunately, there is also a problem about the Czech publications and poor popularisation of Suk in the Czech territory. The last large Czech monograph about Suk's life and works was written in 1956 by Jiří Berkovec, and we can unfortunately find there even some misleading criterions of the official ideology of the time of socialism in Czechoslovakia. There is no

up-to-date monograph on Suk. The popularisation of his works is insufficient even in his native country.

However, the musicians themselves fortunately didn't forget Suk and even his late works. In the second half of 20th century, and still nowadays, there have been some significant interpreters that have promoted Suk. At this moment, I must mention several conductors – Sir Charles Mackerras, Libor Pešek, Kirill Petrenko, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Jiří Bělohlávek, and Jakub Hruša. Thanks to these interpreters, Suk is already better known in the world than he was. As regards the contemporary reception of his works, a very important thing is surely the development of recording industry, thanks to which the discography of Suk's works is already quite wide. We can say that the most successful or one of the most successful Suk's works at the last time is Asrael Symphony. In my opinion, it's caused by the fact that it's already one of Suk's large top works but it still isn't as difficult, both for interpreters and audience, as are his later works. It's surely significant thing that there's a new critical edition of Asrael, and yesterday I read news that the conductor Tomáš Netopil is going to perform it in Essen and even take a recording. So the contemporary reception of Asrael abroad seems to be quite successful.