

THE TONALITY OF CZECH VISUAL ART

The 19th century believed that each „national“ culture nides inside, beside all of the various established symbols and visual iconographic patterns, also some kind of common melodic line, which makes each particular culture different from the other. Maybe it's true to some extent : each landscape has its own tuning and specific rhythm, which are furthermore reflected in the organism of language, movement and eventually in the specific way of vision in a certain region.

Music always took a significant place in the hierarchy of artistic disciplines in the modern history of Czech culture and played an important role in the process of emancipation of Czech national self-confidence within Czech art. It was also Czech music, contrary to visual art, which was successful in entering the broader European context, especially in the first half of the 20 th century. This relative success was the reason for maybe too conservative a picture of Czechoslovak culture prevailing in the West. In the modern history of Czech art a number of artists and musicians engaged themselves in exploring the relationships among colors, shapes and sounds, but the summary of this activity is not, as far as I know, available, or maybe in the process of being made. The first post-war retrospection of one of the foreign members of the international group „Les artistes musicalistes“ took place as late as last year. The founders of this group, Henry Valensi and Charles Blanc-Gatti, together with the poet Paul Valéry and musicians Arthur Honnegger and Maurice Ravel, also invited Arne Hošek (1885 - 1941) to join the Paris exhibition in 1933. Hošek engaged himself in painting, architecture and theory, and today he is considered one of the most significant representatives of the so called „musicalists“.

Hošek could reassume the pioneer work of *František Kupka*, *Vassily Kandinsky* or *Vojtěch Preissig*, for which musical elements were an important background for the composition of their painting. He was also a contemporary of a generation, which, similarly to him, perceived music as a connecting harmonious force and as a model which can aim towards a clear, non-material and non-ideological view of the world. In his water-colors Hošek endeavoured to express a color hearing - synesthesia. From the opposite side the founder of Czech musical avant-garde, *Alois Hába* was approaching this field, and a lonely explorer in the field of experimental music, *Miroslav Ponc*, in his color scores. Lively communication and interdisciplinary characteristic of the avant-garde culture between two wars (*Devětsil*) contributed to the fact that many artists were moving on the boundary-lines of various artistic disciplines. But this situation was soon abruptly interrupted by the political evolution in Europe and it only turned into an echo of the long lost happier times for a long period to come.

It was possible to reassume this tradition in the end of the 50s', when young visual artists and musicians, who stayed away from the socialistic „creative“ pragmatism, started to meet again and cooperate. Composer *Rudolf Komorous*, together with his friends from the Academy of Visual Arts *Bedřich Dlouhý*, *Jan Koblasa*, *Jaroslav Vožniak* and *Karel Nepraš*, established a diversionary dadaistic group, *the Šmidras*, which, in the midst of the grey academic realism of the 50s' and 60s', took care in creating an extraordinarily grotesque and colorful art, both visual and musical. Komorous' poetics, later inspired by eastern philosophy, influenced not only his colleague composers such as *Jan Klusák* or probably the best known representative of the Czech New Music *Petr Kotik*, but also the already mentioned representatives of the art movement Czech Grotesque, the group which also had its own musical division

In the stifling years of normalization in the 70s', the spiritual atmosphere definitely didn't favor the creativity of modern art, but on the other hand, in a way it unveiled an empty cliché and eventually found its expression in the intensive private work and communication within the semi-legal circuit of friends and colleagues. The musical period of *Milan Knížák*, a Czech representative of the movement Fluxus, also played an important role. Knížák, who always did everything in his own way, brought to the mostly restraint and lyrical artistic scene, features of anarchy and destruction, in the beginning strongly social and anti-academic. Towards the end of the 60s' he established an anti-musical group *Aktual*, which accompanied his poetic-proclamative texts. Later he engaged himself in damaging records (Broken Music) and only now he is coming back to „pop-music“. His early work is in many aspects akin to the latter Czech modification of underground art, strongly musically oriented. The most exalted stylization was assumed by the visionary performance of the „cursed“ rock group *DG 307*, lead by *Pavel Zajíček* and *Milan Hlavsa*, or the naivistic-dadaistic group *Sen noci svatojánské Band*, which mixed the poetics of a pub brass band with symphonic music and persiflage of land art and outdoor trips.

Contrary to the underground, which by incessant persecution was sentenced to almost a mythical character, to doubts about its own existence and in connection with all this maybe also sentenced to incessant innovations, some experimental music groups managed to survive on the brink of legality. It was for example „Autentickej z Gokytnan“ or *Kihlets* who, enlightened by the music of the group the Residents, mixed in the beginning of the 80s', in their scarce concerts, the atrical features of rock performance with elements of improvisational and aleatoric music. Another interesting ensemble on the borderline of sound and visuality was *Žabí hlen*, producing a grotesque version of concrete music, in some ways maybe related to musical performances of the Flux, the group HUM or the George Maciunas group. In the ensemble, besides *Vladimír Zadrobilek*, there was also a sculptor and painter *Aleš Veselý* active, who later in the 80s' derived sound electronically from his bulky steel sculptures. These sound recordings added on to his

monumental work another important dimension.

Since the mid 60s' *Milan Grygar* has been engaged in the acoustics of drawing. He records the mechanics and the time dimension of ink drawing on paper and what used to be just a random subsidiary sound, acquires an important value in the work. His experiments with sound evolved in the broad series of the so called „ground-plan scores“, where the drawing is conceived on a geometrical plan and captures the configuration of sound sources: mechanical toys, glockenspiels or the creaking of a drawing stick and their movements on the paper are recorded. Soundplastic scores became a ground for several audiovisual realizations home and abroad, among others interpreted by the percussionist and composer *Alan Vítouš* and saxophonist *Jiří Stivín*. The sound aspect of drawing is also a subject of interest for *Karel Adamus*. In his peripatetic drawings, crated while walking, the whole atmosphere of the landscape - wind, water and light - interplays with the rhythm of the steps and with each other. *Marian Palla* works towards the acoustic recording of an action from another point. He merges sound, performance and visual aspects in a number of various solo, private or group rituals (ensemble *Florian*), which enact the seemingly most simple activities together with the most enigmatic ones. The music *Florian* produces consists of the rolling of stones, smoothing down wood or pouring water, and also from utterly sounless actions such as the falling of a thread or combing hair.

Another artist lately engaged in constructing acoustic sculptures is *Luboš Dalmador Fiedler*. He emerged in this field after a long period of activity in Prague's alternative music scene, where he for example collaborated with the sculptor *Čestmír Suška* and musician *Pavel Richter* in *Výtvarné divadlo Kolotoč* (Graphic theatre Caroussel), in an ensemble which interconnected sound, theatre, film and sculpture. „*Zapomenutý orchestr Země snivců*“ (The Forgotten Orchestra of the Land of Dreamers) plays the variable sound installation made of iron objects and their music, inspired by Bali gamellans, sound nevertheless entirely European, in the same way the acoustic work of *Vojtěch* and *Irena Havels*, influenced by Indian and minimalistic music, sound. Music and visual art complement each other harmonically in the work of the painter, graphic artist, poet and musician *Vladimír Kokolia*. His serial paintings, in many cases created by an organic texture of rythmical repetition of shapes and ornamental figures, are the opposite to the sound sheets and intermingled rhythms of the group *E*, of which Kokolia is a member and a singer.

The discipline of sound installation, as it emerged in Belgium, Holland and Germany, doesn't have many advocates in Czechoslovakia and most of all, it lacks space for its operations. Lately *Miloš Šejn*, with his students at the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague, pursues the relationship between the sound and sight. But we can capture musical sensitivity in the work of many painters and sculptors, and there are good reasons to believe the latest evolution in interconnecting various different media will also open new dimensions here for the art of sound.

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