

Dvořák Society Newsletter #80

July 2007

From Graham Melville-Mason

Oskar Moravec (1917-2007)

The sad news has just reached us from Toronto that the distinguished Czech émigré composer Oskar Moravec (or Morawetz as he was known in Canada) died on 28th June at the age of 90. He was born in Světlá nad Sázavou on 17th January 1917 into a successful Jewish business family which succeeded in making its escape from the Nazi invasions in 1939-40, settling in Canada. Having been a successful pupil of Karel Hoffmeister for piano and Jaroslav Křička for composition, Oskar continued his studies abroad and soon established himself as a successful composer on the Canadian music scene but avoided the modernist trends of the post Second Viennese School. I had the pleasure of meeting him when he returned to Prague in May 1995 after an absence of almost sixty years. A fuller tribute will be published in *Czech Music vol.24*.

Tribute to Miloš Šafránek

On Wednesday, 16th May at the Martinů Foundation Institute in Prague was held a small but fascinating invited gathering to mark the publication of the surviving but incomplete memoirs of Martinů's first biographer and greatest supporting friend, Miloš Šafránek (1894-1982). Members of the Martinů Society will remember that the 2002 Martinů Festival in Prague paid tribute and posthumously awarded the Martinů Medal to him. On that occasion the programme book intimated the projected publication of his memoirs and included short extracts (also in English translation), along with tributes from some who remembered him. Now, some four and a half years later the book has appeared in a fine illustrated edition of 368 pages, by kind permission of his daughter Anna Šafránková-Fárová and with a short concluding comment by Robert Kvaček.

The occasion was opened with a short resumé of Šafránek's relationship with – and writings on – Martinů from Aleš Březina but the highlight of this intimate gathering was the informal but so highly informed talk by Anna Fárová, speaking warmly but openly about her father and his remarkable life's work as a diplomat, widely travelled and cultured intellectual, as well as his important relationship to both the life and work of Martinů. Among further comments was a valuable contribution from Oldřich Korte who knew Šafránek well.

The book, entitled *Setkání po padesáti letech*, has been dedicated to his son Jan (1934-1974), whose English wife is Dr Margaret Safranek (Šafránková), recently retired as the senior partner of the fine Dukes Avenue medical practice in Muswell Hill, North London (and the GP of at least three of our members!). The book is in Czech and provides a fascinating account not only of Šafránek's association with Martinů but his perceptive observations on the political, literary and artistic scene in Europe before and after the Second World War. For those who can read Czech this is an essential addition to their libraries.

Janovický Première

On 24th May, in the beautiful concert hall of the Plzeň Měšťanské beseda, home of the Plzeň Philharmonic Orchestra, the Orchestr Atlantis, conducted by Vítězslav Podrazil, gave the first performance of Karel Janovický's *Prelude and Double Fugue* (2003) in the string orchestra version – a work originally

written for string quartet and dedicated to Graham Melville-Mason on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. This work, as its composer tells us, uses subjects for the fugues Smetana and Dvořák never managed to write, being easily recognisable themes from *The Bartered Bride* and *Rusalka*. The programme included Dvořák's *Serenade for strings in E* (Op.22)[B.52] and *Two Waltzes* (Op.54)[B.105], as well as Vilém Tauský's *Coventry – Meditation for strings* and the première of *Ornaments for piano and strings* by the Russian-Israeli émigré composer Mark Kopytman, in which the excellent soloist was Věra Müllerová.

The programme note paid due tribute to Vilém Tauský, reminding the audience of their fellow countryman who achieved so much for Czech music, especially in his post-war life in Great Britain yet who remains largely unknown even today in his homeland. The same note reflected pride in the son of Plzeň, Karel Janovický, marked also by the number of his friends and family acquaintances present to honour him, as well as some travelling especially from Prague for the occasion. Indeed, it was the performances of Tauský and Janovický which brought the most committed and best playing from the orchestra, with Vilém's *Coventry* having a remarkable intensity of feeling absent from some earlier performances by other ensembles. Karel's work was yet another example of his fine, accomplished and imaginative compositional ability, here coupled with his sense of humour in a piece which clearly gave the audience much delight and pleasure, as well as grateful appreciation from its dedicatee.

Orchestr Atlantis is a small string ensemble of mainly young Prague musicians under the clear direction of Vítězslav Podrazil, whose programmes show a welcome commitment to lesser known Czech composers, coupled with the standard repertoire – on this occasion represented by the Dvořák items in naturally lightweight but beautifully clear performances. In his programme note, the conductor also generously referred to our Dvořák Society and the forthcoming Occasional Publication devoted to Vilém Tauský.

Graham Melville-Mason

Milan Slavický is 60!

Patrick Lambert pays tribute to the man and his music and reviews a CD of his most recent orchestral works on the Matouš label (MK 0056-2031):

Porta coeli, symphonic vision for large orchestra

Two Chapters from St. John's Book of Revelation, for large orchestra

Requiem per soli, coro ed orchestra

Live recordings from the premières in 1992, 1995 and 2005 respectively by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Jiří Bělohávek and Serge Baudo (*Two Chapters*). Soloists: Jana Štefáčková (mezzo) and Ivan Kusnjer (baritone).

This exciting release, a follow up to Matouš's earlier volume of chamber music (MK 0051-2931), happily coincides with a milestone in the life of one of the most significant and internationally recognised Czech composers of the present day and one whose musical pedigree can hardly be denied.

Milan Slavický was born in Prague on 7th May 1947. Not only was his father Klement an established composer and music producer in Czech Radio (soon to be dismissed from his post by