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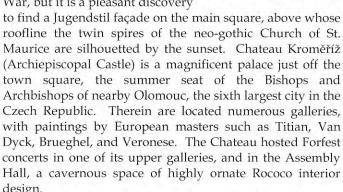
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Forfest Impressions

by Laurence Sherr

Arriving for the first time in Kroměříž, a picturesque Moravian town in the eastern part of the Czech Republic, one is met with many surprises. Impressive architecture, visual art masterworks, and an arts festival and colloquium focused on the spiritual and the avantgarde. The latter is known as Forfest, an annual festival organized for the 24th time [last] summer by Vaclav and Zdenka Vaculovič, a visual artist/musician and violinist, respectively, who reside here year-round.

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Concerts and Art Displays

The 25 June Chateau gallery concert, featuring Aisling Agnew, flute and Matthew McAllister, guitar, was a stunning exhibition of virtuosity and sonic coloration that was notable for how the artists superseded performance flair to deliver each composers work with conviction and integrity. Their interwoven solo and duo repertory was also part of their intentional aesthetic, comprised of composers with whom they had established personal relationships. As Agnew noted, "We feel that it is a very alive format...We're building relationships and working partnerships [with composers] around the world. Music should be alive, and evolving."

Two different concerts filled the evening of 26 June. In the Assembly Hall, Czech cellist Štěpán Filípek and Slovak pianist Ondrej Olos tackled a challenging program of works by living Czech composers, all of whom were in attendance. Filípek handled the sudden shifts of musical landscape, technical playing, and dissonant passages with aplomb. Composer František Emmert, the dean of Czech composers, had two cello and piano works on the program. Two solo cello compositions balanced Emmert's contributions, including the world premiere of a 2012 work by Jan Hajiè. While Assembly Hall's 25-meter ceiling with three paintings occupying 400 square meters is visually impressive, the diffuse acoustics may have led listeners to lose clarity in some of the pieces.

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Featured on the next evening's concert was the work of Massimiliano Messieri, a composer from the Republic of San Marino. (For the curious, the Republic of San Marino is a very small independent country surrounded by Italy, similar to Vatican City.) His solo piano work *Echi di voce umana* fused modern harmonic language with subtle timbral shadings that were superbly expressed by Slovak pianist Elena Letňanová. The second half of the program featured the collaboration between Messieri and Italian

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Forfest Continued from page 1

cellist Nicola Baroni in the form of 21 movements of individual character for cello and electronics, or hypercello, the term used for the electronic extension of Baroni's acoustic sound. Baroni skillfully realized a wide range of timbres and textures, with the hypercello departing most radically from the acoustic sound in the final, culminating movement.

The Ad Libitum Ensemble, based in Budapest, Hungary, arrived for the 29 June evening concert, which once again took place in the Chateau Assembly Hall. The quartet of Ildikó Szakács, soprano, Peter Kazán, clarinet, Ibolya Nagy, cello, and Ferenc János Szabó, piano, presented a program of mixed duos, trios, and quartets. They champion contemporary Hungarian and Slovak composers, and most of the works on their program were performed for the first time in the Czech Republic. The young players gave strong and convincing performances of this repertory, which included the world premiere of an arietta for the whole group by Luboš Bernáth. In their concert, the acoustics of the hall worked in favor of the singer, who at one point, in György Urbán's set of songs for voice and piano, gave an upward sweep of her head as she launched her note out into the hall. With the piano momentarily out, this musical expression worked quite effectively as one could hear the note reflect and spread into the space. The ensemble made a wise choice in programming Robert Muczynski's Fantasy Trio for clarinet, cello, and piano as the final work. Muczynski wrote masterfully for this combination of instruments, and the players skillfully interpreted his composition to provide a fitting culmination to the evening.

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We returned to the Church of St. Maurice that evening for a recorded presentation of 24 Preludes and Fugues for piano by Czech composer Pavel Zemek, who had arrived to be one of the instructors in the POSTFEST composition master classes and workshops. The listener was able to maintain focus and interest through the duration of this monumental work because of the effective use of contrasting textures, speeds, intensities, and rhythms, combined with idiomatic piano writing and harmonic language that was modern yet not overly saturated with dissonance. Delicate and nuanced passages were particularly welcome respites to the more rhythmic and clangorous sections.

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In the afternoon, three presentations explored themes of Jewish artists and composers of the last two generations. My presentation examined themes of sorrow, redemption, and the universal in the Nelly Sachs poetry that is the basis for my Holocaust memorial composition Flame Language, and featured a video of the work from a 2011 Holocaust Remembrance concert in Prague. In the second presentation, bassoon and cello duo Friedrich Edelmann and Rebecca Rust (Germany and USA) performed a duo and cello solo by Hans Gál, informing the audience about how this German-Jewish composer fled to Great Britain after persecution by the Nazis. They concluded with a duo by Israeli composer Max Stern, who then gave the third presentation. Stern played a DVD that presented his work Perek Shira, explaining that it was a series of 18 variations for narrator and orchestra "in which all the animals and all of nature sing a song of praise to the creator." The DVD presented an interesting interlacing of two sequences: nature and animal scenes correlated to the narrator's text, and Stern in the studio conducting members of the Israeli Philharmonic for the recording of the work.

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Laurence Sherr is Composer-in-Residence and Professor of Music at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta, GA

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Renaissance and Baroque architecture dominate this town that was rebuilt after being destroyed in the Thirty Years' War, but it is a pleasant discovery to find a Jugendstil façade on the main square, above whose roofline the twin spires of the neo-gothic Church of St. Maurice are silhouetted by the sunset. Chateau Kroměříž (Archiepiscopal Castle) is a magnificent palace just off the town square, the summer seat of the Bishops and Archbishops of nearby Olomouc, the sixth largest city in the Czech Republic. Therein are located numerous galleries, with paintings by European masters such as Titian, Van Dyck, Brueghel, and Veronese. The Chateau hosted Forfest concerts in one of its upper galleries, and in the Assembly Hall, a cavernous space of highly ornate Rococo interior design.

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2772 words

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