

Czech Music - Viktor Kalabis 1923-2006: a well-tempered composer with a dramatic musical voice

[2006-10-29] By David Vaughan

Few people over the last half century have made an impact on Czech classical music that comes anywhere close to that of the composer Viktor Kalabis, who died on 28th September at the age of 83. His work emerges from a great musical tradition that includes Stravinsky and Martinu, and his compositions are typically characterized by a sense of drama combined with a strong feel for inner musical logic. Viktor Kalabis was also a brilliant organizer. The legacy of his twenty years as Music Director at Czechoslovak Radio that ended in 1972 is felt to this day. He did not have an easy time with the communist regime, and had to wait over forty years before finally being awarded the title of PhD, that he had earned at Prague's Charles University back in 1952. In the years after the Velvet Revolution he played a central role in setting up the Bohuslav Martinu Institute in Prague, devoted to the legacy of the composer. The institute's current director, Ales Brezina, was a close friend and colleague, and a few days ago we met to talk about the life and work of a man who will be hugely missed.



"Viktor Kalabis was one of the most important Czech composers of the second half of the 20th century. He first started to study composition at the conservatoire in Prague. After he had finished studying at the Academy of Music - and he also studied music theory - he started to write his first definitive works. But at the same time he decided to enlarge his interests and he started piano lessons with Zuzana Ruzickova, who is nowadays famous as a harpsichord player of world class."

And their professional relationship developed into something more.

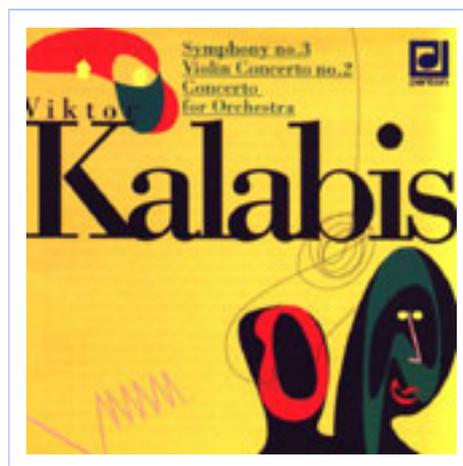
"Exactly one year after the first lesson they married!"

So it really was love at first sight.

"It was love at first touch of the piano and love at the first hearing of the music of Viktor Kalabis! A year later he began a professional relationship with Czechoslovak Radio, where he worked for twenty years."

This was a very fruitful period in his life, wasn't it?

"One of his greatest achievements there was also the creation of an international competition called Concertino Praga. This competition is to this day one of the most important competitions for young musicians all over Europe, and several of the laureates of this competition kept returning to Czechoslovakia even later. So it created also a very nice relationship between musicians from other countries and Czechoslovakia.



"My favourite of his compositions from this time is his Symphony No. 3, which was first performed in Munster and is one of his best pieces. It was finished exactly at the time when Viktor Kalabis left Czechoslovak Radio, and this was an important landmark.

"From 1972 up to late 2000 he kept composing - just composing - and that was, in my opinion, the most important part of his life. At this time he wrote his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, and he also wrote several of his string quartets. I would like to mention his series of six string quartets in

particular, because in my view it is the most outstanding series of string quartets written by a contemporary composer in the second half of the 20th century."

I would like to ask you as well about the influences on Viktor Kalabis. Where would you place his work in Czech music of the second half of the 20th century?

"I would place his music not only in the Czech context but also in the European one, because he was a well educated man who spoke several languages fluently and was interested in everything that happened - also in philosophy and other things. And I would say that his music started where the masters of neo-classicism stopped. His beginnings in the fifties and in the early sixties were deeply influenced by people like Stravinsky and Hindemith, and Honegger and Bartok - and Martinu of course.

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"And then he started to develop his own language, which is very surprising to me at least in one respect. Everybody who knew Viktor Kalabis knew him as a very fun-loving man. You had a very good time with him. But if you listen to his music, most of it is very dramatic and strong, and has a great impact. So it seems as though there were at least two personae in him: the well-tempered one with a lot of humour, and the other one very serious and very grave, I would say, quite often very sad and bitter also. But this you can hear only in some of his pieces. This is not how he really was as a person."

Let's return to his fifty-year marriage to Zuzana Ruzickova, who is quite exceptional in herself, not just as one of Europe's most celebrated harpsichord players, but also in her life story. As a teenager during the war she survived the Terezin Ghetto and Auschwitz, and went on to have an impressive career as a harpsichordist, which continues to this day. Their marriage was not only very close, but also very fruitful musically.

"Out of admiration for his wife Viktor Kalabis composed several pieces for her. He found in her not only a very celebrated harpsichord player, but also a profound specialist on the music of the 20th century. Zuzana Ruzickova performed his pieces worldwide, including one of the most elegant pieces he wrote for her, Aquarelles for Harpsichord, which she recorded several times."