

# What to teach (ourselves)?

Vladimír Bokes

2009

I was a student of composition at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava in 1965-70; I have been teaching this subject for 25 years, and I have been the head of the Department of Composition and Conducting at the Academy for almost 20 years – the witnesses may remember that this little personal jubilee is somewhat related to the jubilee of the Velvet Revolution which we are currently celebrating. I have a contract until the end of the academic year 2010/11; thus, now it is an appropriate time for me to recall the past and to summarize the principles of my composition pedagogy.

I am not going to talk here on the importance of composition pedagogy; I should nevertheless point out that opinions expressing doubts whether any kind of professional education of composers (musicians, artists etc.) makes sense can be regularly heard in our society. I would hope that the achievements of this school during the past 60 years are sufficient to disprove these opinions. Unfortunately, the good tradition from the times of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy requiring schools of music with the public right (i.e. with an accreditation) to have a department of composition and conducting has been forgotten since 1948.

Interestingly, we also face the opposite issue in this country: Slovakia, with its 5 million inhabitants, has two music academies. The first one is currently celebrating the 60th anniversary of its establishment; the second one in Banská Bystrica was founded 14 years ago (in 1995), just at the time during Vladimír Mečiar's government when the school in Bratislava was a target of criticism due to its alleged "antinational" orientation. Let us compare the following statistics:

- Slovakia – 1 school per 2,5 mil. inhabitants
- Austria – 1 school per 2,7 mil. inhabitants
- Germany – 1 school per 4 mil. inhabitants
- Czech Rep. – 1 school per 5 mil. inhabitants
- Poland – 1 school per 5 mil. inhabitants

*The first absurd question: how many music academies and how many composer schools are good to have in a country such as Slovakia?*

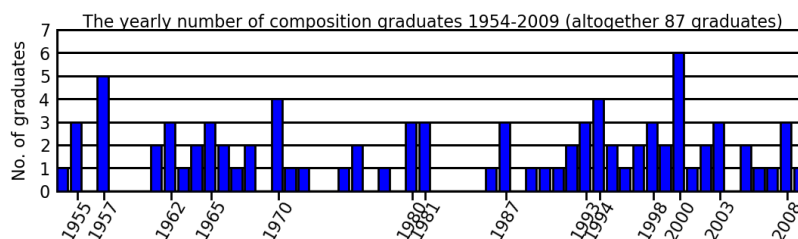
The term “national composer school” was always present in our territory at the times of “building”: between 1918 and 1938, when the Czechoslovak cultural institutions helped to create such a school, in the wartime Slovakia in 1939–45 and in the Communist Czechoslovakia, between 1948 and 1960 in particular, but also after the Soviet occupation in 1968 when it was used to keep away the undesired influences coming from the West. Nowadays, however, it is customary to hear that the current aim of our universities is to reach up to the level of the European ones — ironically, pursuing this aim 30 years ago during the communism regime excluded me from the cultural life at my most active age, and aiming for this goal 14 years ago brought critical remarks on our school from the then Slovak government. Nevertheless, I believe that the diversity due to regional — in this case national — cultural tradition can help enhancing the colorfulness in contemporary music.

*Now it's the right time for the second absurd question: how many teachers and students should the composition class of a music school have?*

One of the reasons for the opening of the other academy of music in Slovakia was that it would arguably bring more competition into the teaching of the subject. This argument is the only one which is acceptable, but I believe that the conditions for such competition can arise within a single school. At the Academy in Bratislava, there have always been at least two distinct composition classes - I should mention Moyzes' and Cikker's classes, which represented the “severe, conservative” class and the “free, modern” one, respectively (although the individual experiences of the graduates in these two composition classes would sometime blur this distinction). These clear dividing lines were present in the school until 1980 at which point softer shades of opinion started to complement this polarity.

Similar polarisation between the traditionalists and the modernists develops among students. The entrance interview is an opportunity to see the differences between the applicants in the command of the classical composition techniques, the differences in the composer personality type (the intuitive, spontaneous or the rational, technical, constructive types), and the different levels of interest in the specific styles and streams. The students gradually position themselves as modernists or traditionalists, or assume various possible forms of the synthesis of both “wings”. However, even this categorisation has been changing its shape since around 1980, as the question “what is modern in the age of the postmodern” is being asked ever more frequently.

Yet another issue can be identified by looking at the annual number of the applicants for or the graduates in composition studies: Prof. Moyzes compared a long time ago this statistics to the biblical parable of seven fertile and seven unfruitful years. Although the number seven should not be taken literally in this context, the interest in the study of composition can certainly be said to be fluctuating over time, as we can see from the following statistics giving the annual number of the graduates in composition in Slovakia since 1954:



The years without any graduates as well as those in which a large number of students graduate break the regular rhythm of the school. Looking for the causes of these fluctuations, I cannot avoid comparing the series of zeros to the years of negative changes in the overall cultural and political situation in Slovakia. The periods without any graduates in composition affect the structure of the musical life. The statistics demonstrate that the study of composition was with almost no students three times (in 1958, 1972 and 1981) during the 60 years of its existence (how to improve quality in these conditions?) and that the founding of the second music academy in B. Bystrica after 1995 resulted in higher numbers of students.

Conclusion: interest in study is the key factor. It is preferable for a composition school to have teachers of varied aesthetic preferences and with different methodical approaches. Looking at the above numbers, it is curious that there are four years without graduates in 1949–68, ten such years between 1969 and 1988, but only one such year in 1989–2008. It is however important to note also the years with only one graduate (there are 16 such years), in which the necessary communication and competition between students were missing. The result is striking: during more than half of the past 60 years, music composition in this country had to strive for survival.

*Where does the applicant for studies come from, what does he do, what should he do at the school, and what are his career options when he completes his studies?*

The entrance examination is an opportunity to differentiate between the two kinds of applicants in regard to their previous education: the first kind of students, who attended the conservatory, can further be sub-divided into those who studied composition and/or conducting and into the prodigies coming from the ranks of instrumentalists; the second kind of students are those who completed general studies at a gymnasium while taking at the same time private lessons in composition and music theory comparable to the conservatory curriculum.

The applicants normally have a satisfactory knowledge of the traditional composition subjects, but the majority of them have only a sporadic knowledge of contemporary music, having been limited by the shortage of information on this subject. This statement is not meant to be a criticism of the quality of our conservatories, it should rather be understood with respect to the overall cultural life in our society. The teachers of composition and music theory, who are more than 40 years old, are the graduates of the old school system; their orientation in style and aesthetics, however positively it may be rated in specific cases, is a result of (unsystematic) individual taste and of the experiences they gained in the (battle)field

of contemporary music. Our composition department may select the criteria for study, but the conservatories are not obliged to accept them; they may say: we have the freedom to teach what we want.

Having started their bachelor degree in composition, some students need to learn the topics which should have been covered during the secondary education: the theme and its building, the correct leading of voices, the correct connection of chords, the rules of the strict counterpoint, the modulations. The talented student gains swiftly the mastery in these topics and at the same time enters the world of contemporary music. This entry may sometimes be accompanied by problems and conflicts. In a school, in which the teacher and the student engage in a free dialogue, there is no other way than to broaden with patience the horizons of the student's knowledge. Does such an approach restrain the freedom of the student's thought? Prof. Claus Ganter from Vienna talked about this issue more than 15 years ago when he posed the classical question: "What to do with a student who writes like Brahms?" The only answer is this: to make the student understand Bruckner, Mahler, R. Strauss, Reger, Debussy, Schoenberg and his school, Stravinski, Bartok and so on *up until today*. I stress the last words because e.g. Schoenberg, who died 58 years ago, cannot be considered a representative of contemporary music anymore. He is a part of history just as Beethoven was in 1885, at which point Wagner's "Gesamtkunstwerk" was completed. In spite of that, Schoenberg and his school is still a problem for many students, in particular for those interested in the American minimalism or for the students with an ambition to write pop music. It is however strange that it should be so at the time of departure of composers like Ligeti, Xenakis, Berio, Stockhausen and Kagel. In the end, the student has to make his own mind what to do during his studies and after their completion. The life of a contemporary composer is hard, but the majority of the 87 graduates up to now have managed.

*A pseudo-problem and another absurdity: nowadays we often hear that education needs to be relevant for the praxis. What is the praxis in case of music? Should the school in an attempt to approach the general taste focus on the so-called "light" genre?*

I shall answer by mentioning a couple of examples.

A number of students of the traditional class of Prof. A. Moyzes, who was attracted to jazz music in his youth, focused during and after their studies on this genre. They distinguished themselves in the sphere of pop music and jazz owing to their expertise and some of them became successful in musicals. Their eventual return to the serious (i.e. contemporary) music, often in their fifties, would however always be difficult because the practice in the light genre put a lasting mark on their musical language. (As my teacher at the conservatory would say: "give a finger to the devil and he will take your hand.")

A friend of mine from the conservatory, Marian Varga, had an exceptional talent for composition. His aversion to the discipline in the theory of harmony and counterpoint made him unable to finish this school and led him to pursue the career of an admired rock musician. Although he did not finish any formal music

education, he became acquainted with the music by Lutoslawski, Gorecki and Pärt; unfortunately, he did not know the works by Schoenberg or Boulez. He would have liked to study later in his forties, but nothing came out of it.

Marek Brezovsky commenced his studies with me in 1993 as a similar exceptional talent; he wrote remarkable songs and music for an experimental theatre group. He died tragically from an overdose during the first year of his studies. . .

It is not only jazz and the pop music I would like to talk about. Eastern Europe is a territory with great folk music tradition. This genre often attracts composers and those, who focus in the long-term on the practise of arrangement of folk songs, find it difficult to return back to the serious genre. The brass music brings about the same issues. A long-term practise of any of these genres makes it difficult for the composer to find his way back to the serious genre. However, there are also some peculiar cases, one of which I would like to mention: one of my first students, Milos Betko, had a very strong affinity to new music. In his bold and sonoric diploma work for orchestra, he wanted to apply the technique of collage to the fragments of brass music; therefore, near the end of his studies he needed to write a short march for a brass ensemble — and I had to study a handbook for bandmasters because of that.

I think that four examples are enough. Each tells of some specific experiences. A certain level in mastering the various – including the commercial ones – music genres is a part of the composer's expertise. It is however important to know the extent to which the composer should be interested in these genres, so that they do not have a negative influence on his professionalism.

*Is not the effort to create something new “at all costs” a professional deformation?*

“How could one possibly live without the unknown ahead?”, asks the surrealist poet Rene Char, thus expressing one of the ideals of art – to search for new expression. In the Psalms we read “Cantate Domino canticum novum”, which shows that the ideal of innovation is just as old as art and music themselves. The need to play a note which has not yet been played, to strike a chord which has not yet been constructed, or to use a sequence which has never been used — all these aspirations lead us to yet unknown dissonances, to new effects of intensity, to the construction and production of new, more perfect instruments and towards the use of electroacoustics and computers in the 20th century and today. New music often hits against the wall of the expectations of the audience; misunderstandings and scandals are an indispensable part of the music life. The history of music criticism is full of statements which sound ridiculous in hindsight; nevertheless, they made the life unpleasant for the composer. The totalitarian regimes of the 20th century are not behind in this direction: the Nazi Germany accuses Schoenberg of (jewish)bolshevism; fifteen years later, he becomes the symbol of foul capitalism for the communist states in Eastern Europe. Today, the opinion on modern music still appears to be ambiguous: yes to the Second Viennese school, but no to the Darmstadt school. It seems that Stockhausen, who died two years ago, and his work are in the same situation as Schoenberg was 50 years ago. All the alleged negatives of

the Second Viennese school from the past are attributed to the Darmstadt school today. Some years ago, a rule was held in our school: first, learn the traditional mastery, then do anything you like. I have a feeling that it is the time to change this rule, since the term tradition has a different meaning than it had 50 years ago. I would like to state it this way: to search for new means of expression in parallel with acquiring of the mastery of tradition. For many — even for professionals — the time of searching for the new is over; remember Francis Fukuyama: history has ended. However, time keeps going on and many things have changed since this sentence was pronounced. History continues. Postmodernism declares far too often that all is possible, except for avant-garde.

Let us therefore try to say what is new today, in 2009. A new melody? New music is considered unmelodious for more than 200 years. A new rhythm? Certainly it will not be the automatic drums, but maybe irregularity instead. A new harmony? The term “cacophony” has had its history. A new form? Each experienced composer knows that the intentional violation of the formal rules turns in some time into their validation. New intensity? Certainly not more and more decibels. New sound? New contexts? New audience?

We could go on and on to infinity.

*Translated from Slovak by Vladimír and Pavol Bokes.*