

Interview with Miroslav Srnka

Jury member in the category String Quartet

Interviewer: Jennifer Ronyak, Senior Scientist at *Institute 14: Aesthetics of Music*

JR: Thank you very much for coming to be interviewed, and thank you for serving on the string quartet jury. I thought we'd start with your current work as a composer in the arena of the string quartet and chamber ensembles. What about chamber music attracts you as a composer?

MS: I would say that it is the hygiene of the compositional work. I had a lucky period of many years of big commissions for orchestras and opera, but the last piece that I finished was a string quartet.

JR: Yes, I did see that. Could you tell us more about the work?

MS: It was performed just recently in Paris, in the Philharmonie, and I spent a disproportionate amount of time on it – a long time – because it was a chance for me to refocus after the big scores, to get back to the grounds of my technique. And it is never possible to build up something new from above you – you have the big idea, but also the technique of the detail. Although I have not been composing that long, as I understand it my works do group in some kinds of clusters of some years, and these groups normally start with some kind of small chamber work.

JR: That's interesting.

MS: So I guess it is just now starting with my last string quartet.

JR: You've started a new period perhaps.

MS: I just feel some kind of shift.

JR: That's intriguing. So would you say then, to follow up to that a bit, that that ensemble – the string quartet itself – called for the refocusing from below of which you speak?

MS: Not exactly, it was also a matter of my own desire to go back to work on something for a smaller ensemble. I had a huge commission for an opera for the Bavarian State opera, which was something that I had to work on for three years, technically, and I kind of craved to go back to the small. And lucky as I am I could arrange that the next thing would be a chamber work. So I probably did it subconsciously, deliberately to refocus.

JR: Yes, that's nice when external and internal drives come together. So this work that you are speaking of, *Future Family*, you describe it as a script for four sound actors with string instruments in twenty-four moments, which is a very suggestive description. Could you say a bit more about this concept?

MS: It is an attempt to move from the concept of a work as a finished, closed thing that has this completely encapsulated place in a concert program. So this one, first, it can have various lengths, between, I guess, 20 and 30 minutes, and second, it comes from a different definition of what one musician in the string quartet is. I actually call it roles or characters, because I try to define something that in the spoken theater would be a role that is then more tailored for a musician. And that is why in the ideal state and final score, which is not ready yet, it should be completely variable, so that any of those parts could be played by any of the instruments. So the score has to actually have the possibilities of all transpositions. And it has to work, so it was a very hard concept for the compositional technique, and at the same time it should give to the musicians some kind of choice, which is for me very important, in the way that I define, how we define, generally, the string quartet also as a social unit.

JR: Yes.

MS: Family is for me in the personal life the thing that is comparable, the comparable social unit in real life, in size, of course and also in that self-definition of roles to the string quartet. And if you look at the history of the string quartet, the acoustic roles in the history of the structure of writing, the textures, were kind of pre-defined. But they don't have to be anymore. The new structure of contemporary music does not necessarily deal with building up chords from up-down or, you know, these kind of notions. This actually allows the composer and the musicians to then redefine the roles in the string quartet. And for me the most important thing is that the players can choose their roles.

JR: That is an interesting aesthetic and political comment. Could you say more?

MS: This is important because I think that it is one of the paramount things in today's society that we grasp this choice, this freedom of choice in our social units. We have some kinds of stereotypical roles that actually work socially for many, and I'm no friend of saying they are only bad. But at the same time we need to defend the right to re-choose it. And this is something that actually the string quartets, if they play Schubert here for example, cannot re-choose their roles. So the cellist has some kind of acoustic role that he or she cannot change. But at the same time, he or she has a social role in the string quartet as such because the string quartet is a life of four people together. And there is for me no other ensemble that would really kind of so extensively tour together, and share the car and all that kind of stuff. It really, really, has so much to do with family. And for me it is fascinating to observe the musicians – how they actually deal with that, because they have their own families, or relationships, whatever, and at the same time they have to set up some kind of professional, social unit to survive.

JR: Yes, and some of these – we hear stories – some of these function very beautifully, and some of them, like other families, not so well. But somehow they still play together.

MS: Yes, and that was the meta-level of string quartet I tried to address in that work.

JR: Yes, that is very interesting; thank you for explicating that so fully. So, when it comes to working with a specific ensemble or a commission, what do you find most intriguing about

working with a specific group of musicians on a composition? How important is that for the process?

MS: It is a very important thing actually, that I mostly write in the last years for people that want me to write something for them, which changes very much the relationship. Of course it does not concern so much the orchestra, but in smaller ensemble playing and in chamber music especially, those are people who just decided to play you.

JR: Yes, so they want your sound.

MS: Yes, exactly. So what does it mean? It means that there is a pre-trust from their side, which gives me some kind of freedom. For example, this last string quartet, it was for Quatour Diotima, and I have worked with them since-ten years. This was very good because this concept was even for them so surprising that at the very beginning they were like “uh huh, what is this?,” and then they seemed to decide, “well, we know him so well since years, so we should trust him.” Only when I flew to Paris to work with them, and I really just spent two days explaining the ideas, two full days, did it then first start to open up for them somehow.

JR: Yes, ok.

MS: So now to say it from the other way around: where and when do you get this that people just listen to your crazy ideas about something? But in fact this is the only work that makes sense, because our task as composers is to create some energy situation, something that was not possible before. This means the music has to be surprising in some way for the people who play it. And at the same time this surprise might make them feel uncomfortable, because they are the ones who then stand in front of the audience, and they have to be convincing. So there is this huge tension, which you have only in working with chamber music, with specific fantastic people, who you are lucky to work with.

JR: That’s very interesting. Turning now to the importance of modern music for this competition, what recent repertoire for string quartet, especially that was maybe played already in the competition, did you find most striking?

MS: Most striking...what was interesting for me was that we unfortunately did not have a *Pflichtstück*, as did the participants in the category piano trio and duo for voice and piano, which is the real litmus test. To see how the people really deal with contemporary music. We had pieces that they brought, that they chose from the list, and those interesting ones who came to the second round made completely different choices from one another. So we had a Chinese piece, which was called Sand Dance no. 3, which brought in fascinating, different, and a still very unique and enlighteningly simple structure; it brought us a completely different color into the competition. And we had a piece by Thomas Adès, who is one of the renowned composers, so this was a piece that I knew. This was actually not fair, I would say, because I knew some recordings by some genius guys who probably worked with Tom Adès on it. It has turned out to be much more technically difficult than it seems to be from the referential recordings that I know. I was also fascinated by the way that my jury colleagues, who are themselves string players, actually reacted to the pieces differently than I did.

JR: That's also very interesting, and that's why there are so many different people on the jury, I'm sure. That also leads me to ask, what is your perspective on – not so much the Schubert quartets themselves – but the other compulsory pieces for early nineteenth-century quartets that were on the program? Which ones do you find most interesting in the history of the string quartet? Or relevant for today?

MS: I have this rule: this classical world is so full of material – just all the music of Schubert would last how many days— and this leads to a kind of motto of mine – only the best. A composer should really pick only the best from what was written before, and really focus on it, and then study it really deeply. I don't really think that studying everything by everyone would really push you forward. This is what I know from my musicology life. There is this approach of doing the complete editions, and for the scholarship it has a huge value. But for me as a composer, the value is, I take something that is fascinating, and I need to crack why is it so fascinating for me, because I cannot change my fascination. I have to understand it. From this perspective I am actually kind of slightly surprised that for the first round, where you have most of the quartets, they also get a choice of early works by Schubert or by Mendelssohn. They are maybe in a purely technical way not that complicated, but they are still in a developing language from young composers. They are on the way. I find it as a composer, especially, difficult for young performers to interpret those works, because things are not so clearly said in a compositional way. So they are actually harder to be performed than the canonical works. It is a hard task raised to the second power.

JR: That is interesting how those ideas all play off of each other.

MS: So I am looking forward to tomorrow, since they are finally allowed to play the late ones. And in the feedback we had until now, most of the quartets that had to leave had a difficulty to perform these early Schubert quartets. And they admitted it.

JR: Maybe in the future they can switch around the compulsory works. You've given us a lot to think about, and I thank you for your time.

MS: Thank you.