

VÍTEZSLAVA KAPRÁLOVÁ

by Dr. David C.F. Wright



In a time when female composers were not generally accepted, there appeared Vítězslava Kaprálová. Sadly, she is only remembered as being the mistress of Bohuslav Martinu; his splendid String Quartet no. 5 of 1938 celebrates the affair.

Kaprálová came from Moravia. She was born in Brno on 24 January 1915. Her list of numbered works only runs to twenty-five, although there are also many unnumbered works. Her father, Václav Kaprál, was born in Urcice on 26 March 1889, who studied with Janáček at the Brno Organ School for three years (1907–1910). He found Janáček was not to be a good teacher. He also studied privately with Novák (1919–1920). Václav also undertook a piano course with Alfred Cortot in Paris (1923–1924). In 1911 he had set up his own Piano School in Brno. From 1927 he lectured at Masaryk University and in 1936 became professor of composition at Brno Conservatory. After the tragic death of his daughter, Kaprál was involved with the Czech Resistance and was interred in an concentration camp at Svatoborice for three years. In 1946 he became the professor of the New Academy of Musical Art in Brno but was suffering from an incurable tumour and he died in Brno on 6 April 1947. Among his compositions are two string quartet (1925 and 1927), the second with a solo baritone), four piano sonatas (1918, 1921, 1924 and 1939) and Lullabies for chorus and orchestra of 1932–1933, which was probably his greatest success. In 1943 he composed a Mass for Svatoborice.

Vítězslava made her first attempts at composing when she was nine. She enrolled at the Brno Conservatory at the age of fifteen contrary to the wishes of her father, who believed that the conservatory was male dominated and that she would not fit in. Over those five years, she studied composition with Vilem Petr•elka and conducting with Zdenek Chalaba. At the age of twenty, she went to the Prague Music School to study composition with Vítězslav Novák and conducting with Václav Talich.

Novák was born on 3 December 1870 and was the most influential teacher in Czechoslovakia. He had studied with Dvorák and among Novák's works are four operas, two ballets, choral music with orchestra and four famous symphonic poems namely In the Tatra Mountains, Eternal Longing, Toman and the Wood Nymph and Lady Godiva, although the last named is often referred to as an overture. He wrote a Piano Quartet and a Piano Quintet and three String Quartets (1899, 1905 and 1930). There is a Piano Concerto in E minor of 1895 and, surprisingly, a May Symphony of 1943 dedicated to Stalin. He died on 18 July 1949.

Petr•elka was born in 1889 and died in 1967. He also studied under Janáček and Novák. I have heard his Symphony no. 4, remarkable for its monothematicism, and his String Quartet no. 5.

Vítězslava's father, Václav Kaprál, was of the same generation as Martinu. Kaprál had studied with Janáček in Brno and developed into being a fine pianist, renowned for his duet and two piano performances with Ludvik Kundera (b. 1891). Kaprál gave performances not only of Czech music but works by Milhaud, Stravinsky and Schoenberg in Brno and had some of his own works played at the ISCM Festivals during the 1930s.

In 1932 Vítězslava's parents separated which may explain the second song of the two that make up her Opus 4, Osirely (Orphaned) which may express her loneliness and the many visits she made to a sanatorium in Smokovec. The song Tatov k narozeninam from Opus 18 is dedicated to "Dad on his birthday 26 March 1937. Similarity the song K narozeninam me maminsky is entitled For the birthday of my mum.

Vítězslava had an affinity with poetry and some believe her songs are her best work. Like Martinu, she was an ardent nature lover and loved to stay at Tri Studne among the pine trees and lakes.

It was during a holiday spent at the Kaprál family's summer residence in Tri Studne (Three Wells) in the Czech-Moravian highlands, about a twenty minute bicycle ride from Martinu's house in Policka, that she began composing her String Quartet, Op 8, a three movement work lasting about 20 minutes. She finished it in 1936. It seems to express her joy at graduation from Prague. Her graduation work was her award-winning Piano Concerto in D minor, Op 7, the first movement of which she conducted at the Prague Conservatory with Ludvik Kundera as the soloist. This was at the Stadion Hall, Brno on 17 June 1935 at the Brno Conservatory Graduation Concert. On 15 October 1936 it was performed by Kundera with the composer conducting and broadcast on Brno radio.

She was present at a concert in Brno in 1937 when Rudolph Firkusny played Martinu's Piano Concerto no. 2, composed in 1935. The effect was immediate and Kaprálová's decision was instantaneous. Later that

year Martinu visited Prague to commence rehearsals for his opera Julietta and visited a restaurant to have lunch. By chance, Kaprálová was lunching at the same restaurant and an introduction was made. This would have been 8 April 1937. Because she was soon to graduate from the Prague Conservatory, Martinu suggested that she continue her post-graduate studies in Paris on a one-year French government scholarship. Although he was not the most willing teacher Kaprálová's good looks, charm and talent mesmerised Martinu. He had apparently just suffered the rejection of becoming professor of composition at the Prague Conservatory as it was coming up to Novák's retirement, which occurred in 1939.

Upon graduating from Prague she received a grant to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and Charles Munch at the Ecole Normale de Musique, arriving in Paris on 28 October 1937. She lived in a hotel overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. In anticipation of studying with Martinu in the French capital she had composed her April Preludes for piano, dedicated to Firkusny. Martinu showed her the city, and it must have reminded him of his first visit to Paris some twenty years earlier. He called her Vítězlava Pisnicke (Little Song). Martinu was a year younger than her father and married to Charlotte Quennehen, a Paris dressmaker. The affair between Martinu and Kaprálová began, and Charlotte had anonymous letters telling her of the clandestine affair, but she did not believe it and threw the letters away. At the time Martinu was completing his masterpiece Julietta, which tells of Michel who finds his ideal woman, but she is unattainable as she is only a dream. In this opera was mirrored how he felt for Kaprálová, and she adored him. Julietta was premiered in 1938 under Václav Talich. Sadly, Charlotte Martinu was not musical and therefore Bohuslav could not share his joys or work with her. It is said that Martinu gave Kaprálová the autographed manuscript of Julietta to her shortly before her death.

Kaprálová studied with Martinu from October 1937 to the summer of 1938, when her scholarship ran out. Due to Martinu's intervention her stipend was renewed and she returned to Paris on 11 January 1939.

She returned home briefly after her first year of study. It was to be the last time she saw her homeland.

During 1936 and 1937 she composed her Military Sinfonietta, Op 11, so called because the themes seem to have a military feel about them and because it portrayed the military situation in Europe at the time and the concept of Czech independence and nationalism. The impetus for this work came from Novák, who probably set Kaprálová the task of an orchestral work. The work brought her fame. It was performed in the Lucerna Hall, Prague on 26 November 1937 by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the composer in the presence of the Czechoslovakian president, Edvard Benes, to whom the work is dedicated. The concert was organised by the National Women's Council. A year later she conducted it with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, led by Paul Beard, at a ISCM concert in London. This was at the Queen's Hall on Friday 17 June and in the opening concert of the Festival. Fifteen days earlier she had conducted Martinu's Harpsichord Concerto in Paris with Marcelle de Lacour as soloist, and this was at Martinu's request.

Also in 1937 she set Vítězslav Nezval's poem Waving Farewell for voice and orchestra, which she described as her farewell to that most beautiful of cities, Prague. Martinu supervised the orchestration as Theodore Schafer had done with the Military Sinfonietta. Schafer lived from 1904 to 1969 and was a pupil of Kvapil and Novák and the pioneer of the diathematic method. He wrote a Violin Concerto, a Piano Concerto, the Balladic Overture: Janošík, the Legend of Happiness and Diathema for viola and orchestra. His Symphony took four weeks to compose and was completed in 1962.

Earlier, Kaprálová had set Nezval's A Goodbye and a Scarf, which music clearly shows Martinu's influence.

She had met Martinu in April 1937 when he was 47 and she was 22. In late October 1937 she became his pupil, but this soon developed into a love affair. In November 1937 they began composing wind trios to rival each other. The change in their relationship from master-pupil to lovers is shown in their respective Love Carols. Martinu wrote his to a piece of folk poetry and Kaprálová wrote hers as a response and was delighted that Martinu preferred her work to his own. Martinu's Quartet no 5 is akin to Janáček's Quartet known as Intimate Letters, and the reason is obvious. Martinu asked Kaprálová to return to Paris, where he was now based. This she did in January 1939. They worked together. Martinu was engaged on his Ricercari which motivated the 23 year old woman to compose her Partita for piano and string orchestra, Op 20. Martinu referred to these works as our dear ricercares. The Partita was sketched in the Autumn of 1938 in Brno and Martinu made many contributions to the final version, rejecting some of her ideas and advising on the themes and orchestration. The work was completed in Paris in the Spring of 1939.

During 1938 Martinu wrote many letters to Kaprálová. In them he wrote such sentences as:

I am so longing to see you and I know that you belong to me and only me and then I can't believe

that you could only be mine.

You are my only sunshine, my only warming ray that gives me courage and I just can't see how I could stand it if you don't come and if you were not with me all the time.

Can't you understand how I feel when I cannot exist without you and when I see you going further and further away

By Christmas 1938 Martinu decided to ask Vítězslava to live with him. He wrote:

If you would like to be with me all the time I would like to have a home just for the two of us but possibly sharing it with a baby. I am sure you would be happy with me. I would do everything to make you happy and contented.

In January 1939 Kaprálová managed to leave Czechoslovakia and returned to Paris but not to live with Martinu. The mood had changed. War was in the air. She stayed friendly with Martinu and had a few lessons. By now her attention had turned to the Czech writer, Jiri Mucha, as there was no future with Martinu. Mucha was another refugee. He came from Bohemia. Kaprálová told a friend that Martinu was too old. In Paris the little Czech community in Paris heard that the Nazis had annexed Czechoslovakia and were in Prague.

The war had a direct bearing on Kaprálová's life. In her last August in Czechoslovakia, 1938, she composed her *Suite Rustica*, Op 19. The slow movement conveys something of the time. The Czech Army was mobilised in May 1938 in view of the Nazi threat. Her last work is the deeply moving *Ritornelli*, Op 25, for cello and piano. Originally she had planned to write a group of two ritornelli.

Vítězslava had realised that her relationship with Martinu was going nowhere. It had no possible future. He had been with Charlotte since 1926 and she stayed with him for 33 years up to Martinu's death in 1959. He was to have other affairs including the six year affair in America with Roe Barstow from 1946 onwards.

On 23 April 1940 Kaprálová married Jiri Mucha, the son of the painter Alfons Mucha, and the following month the tuberculosis that killed her worsened dramatically. The case had been diagnosed as hopeless months before, at the end of 1939, when she went to see a famous Czech specialist in Paris, Dr. Brumlik. His diagnosis was direct. Nothing could be done for her. She had tuberculosis.

It was said that she had tuberculosis miliaris, but the symptoms did not match those shown by Kaprálová in the last six weeks of her life. Her illness was acute and involved several abdominal pain resembling appendicitis, which is a symptom associated with tuberculosis peritonitis.

When she married Mucha in April 1940, Martinu did not attend the wedding. She and her husband moved from Paris to the south of France to escape the Nazi terror, where she died at Montpellier on 16 June 1940. She was twenty-five years old.

Probably the last music she heard was the premiere of Martinu's Cello Sonata no. 1, given by Pierre Fournier and Firkusny, but she was so ill that she could not enjoy it. None of her friends knew how ill she was until the end of 1939, but the life and vivacity had gone from her, and it was now obvious how ill she was. All her life she had been attractive, if not an outstanding beauty, and was attracted to men almost to the point of nymphomania. Her uncle, who was in the Czech Army in France, was horrified by her lifestyle, late nights, little sleep, drinking and smoking, and when he voiced his concern she took no notice. Now, apart from the swelling in her abdomen, she was thin and small.

Martinu recalled the last photographs he had of her holding her dog, Sotek, and how small she was, leading some to believe that her dumpiness, the swelling in her abdomen, suggested peritonitis. Her face was badly marked with spots. She underwent surgery but it was too late, far too late and she died holding her husband's hand telling him to listen to and enjoy music, and it is reported that her last word was Julietta.

It was Firkusny who wrote to Martinu to tell him that his beloved Vitulka was dead. He loved her to the end of his life although he had other affairs. In 1947, Martinu wrote a memoir of her which included these sayings:

Everywhere she went she brought Spring. She was patient, kind, friendly energetic, instinctive. I seldom had the chance to meet anyone so gifted, so conscious of the task she had and wanted to fulfil. And this is one of the things I cannot explain, why fate took her, why fate gave her such gifts, so precious and unique, only to take them away. It was a great joy to discuss musical problems with her. She never forgot that I could be wrong. Our worlds and conceptions were different. She would always justify and defend her opinions. She always knew what she wanted and she also knew when she was incapable of putting her ideas into action. I learned from her too. It was a great joy to see the fight between the soul and the material again.

After the war, in 1946, friends went to the south of France to bring back her remains and bury them in

her homeland.

In 1957 Kaprálová's mother asked Martinu to write a composition in memory of Václav and Vitulka, the pet name for Vítězlava. He had returned from America and was living in Rome. He wrote a short adagio of forty bars entitled Reminiscences, a touching epitaph.

Her music is accessible but never banal. It shows a secure sense of craftsmanship. Her piano writing is exemplary and her music has a quality and glow that many will find irresistible.

Julietta!

The major part of this essay was written in 1996, but updated in 2006 following additional information being made available.

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