

VIKTOR KALABIS

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Kalabis died last year. He was a very important Czech composer who wrote in traditional genres and whose music had a personal voice.

He was born on 27 February 1923 in Cerveny Kostelec. In 1945 he entered the Prague Conservatory studying with Emil Hlobil and then progressed to the Academy of Music and Art studying with Jaroslav Ridky. He also studied at the Charles University in Prague.

He was never physically strong and suffered from poor eyesight. Later he developed kidney trouble and the plague which is diabetes.



During the war he worked in an aircraft factory from about 1944. He had taught at a girls school.

A competent pianist drew him to the exceptional keyboard player Zuzana Ruzickova who had survived a concentration camp. They were married in 1952. Zuzana became a brilliant harpsichordist.

Czech Radio in Prague employed him as a music producer and he specialised in music for children. He was in this post for nineteen years. He formed a fine children's choir and encouraged many young instrumentalists. In 1972 he left this post to concentrate on composing.

His style is probably romantic with elements of folk music. He liked Russian music and admired Stravinsky. His early works include:

Piano Sonata no 1 Op 2 (1947)

Concerto for chamber orchestra Op 3 (Homage to Stravinsky) (1948)

String Quartet no 1 Op 6

Cello Concerto Op 8 (1950)

Piano Concerto no 1, op 12 (1953)

Symphony no. 1 Op 14 (1957)

This was based on the notes H R e A D E R C which spells a Czech town

Violin Concerto no 1 Op 17 (1959)

Symphony no 2 Op 18 (Sinfonia Pacis) (1961)

String Quartet no 2, Op 19 (1963)

And so by the age of forty, he had composed three concertos for a soloist, an orchestral concerto, two symphonies and two string quartets... large works in traditional and conventional forms. On every count this was impressive.

With the Nazi occupation of his beloved country and then its Communist regime, Viktor and Zuzana refused any association with the enemy and refused to join the Communist party and so they were both politically out of favour and disparaged. It is untenable that politicians should dictate to musicians. The Communists objected strongly to his Symphony no 2 because it was anti-Communist and written at the time of the Cuba crisis when a nuclear war seemed likely.

However, it did not deter Kalabis. His first piano concerto was a wedding present for his wife. His first public success was probably his Cello Concerto played by Manual Rosenthal in Paris in 1957. I

think that his Harpsichord Concerto, Op 42, written for his wife, was performed in Birmingham in 1989 with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra under Karel Sejna. It has had performances throughout Europe and a performance in Adelaide, Australia.

Vaclav Neumann asked Kalabis for a work which became the Chamber Music for strings Op 21. Karel Ancerl commissioned a work which was the Concerto for Orchestra Op 25 which won an important State prize and deservedly so. Kalabis also began writing solo works for instrument and piano such as sonatas for viola, violin, cello, clarinet and trombone.

The Symphony no. 3 Op 33 of 1971 depicts the suffering of the Czech people under political harassment. Herbert Blomstedt commissioned the Symphony no 4, Op 34 of 1973 for the Dresden Staatskapelle. Among other things, this shows the respect Kalabis enjoyed. The Harpsichord Concerto has been played all over the world and his wife would play this concerto often programming it with the concerto by Martinu.

I do not know how interested Kalabis was in art but his Symphony no 5 is an one movement work inspired by Michelangelo. This dates from 1976.

Josef Suk premiered the Violin Concerto no 2 of 1972 and the composer told me that he was delighted by the performance. "To write a violin concerto is one thing; to write it for an amazing soloist is another thing!". The first performance was conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch.

From the 1980s Kalabis was plagued with illness. His sight was failing and his diabetes was causing trouble which only we diabetics understand. It must be recorded here that his wife was a marvellous support and nothing was too much trouble for her. Would that all wives were the same!

He had helped set up the Martinu Foundation in 1975 and was its president until his health prevented this around 2003. He continued to compose achieving a total of seven string quartets and he produced his Piano Concerto no 2, Op 64 in 1985.

His cantata Canticum Canticorum Op 65 was commissioned by the Bach expert Helmuth Rilling utilising the same orchestration of Bach's Mass in B minor. It is one of his many works that warrant a revival.

He died on 28 September 2006.

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