

Beckerman, Michael

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How Desperate He Must Feel Sitting There Helplessly: Jews, Gypsies, Czechs...and the Chinese...from *Zápisník* to Terežín and Beyond

Michael Beckerman / mike.beckerman@gmail.com

College of Arts and Science, New York University, USA

Abstract

This study looks at three related „snapshots“ from, respectively, Janáček's *Zápisník zmizelého*, Pavel Haas' *Chinese Songs*, and Hugo Haas' film, *The Girl on the Bridge*. All three invoke the agonizing tension between movement and stasis, raise questions of freedom and imprisonment, and they all involve delicate and painful connections between the groups mentioned in the title above. It is my argument that together these thickly packed snippets can be considered a kind of continuous art work, providing a micro-history of the period between 1919 and 1951.

Keywords

Leoš Janáček, *Zápisník zmizelého*, Pavel Haas, *Chinese Songs*, Hugo Haas, *The Girl on the Bridge*, Antonín Dvořák, *Cello concerto in B minor*

In the middle of the middle of Dvořák's *Cello Concerto* there is a famous passage. The pastoral hymn has returned in a reprise when suddenly a cadence is foiled by a *forte* interruption of a funeral march fragment, which is in turn interrupted by a pianissimo cello solo, marked *molto espressivo a largamente*. It is widely agreed that the cello solo is a quotation from Dvořák's Op. 82, No. 1 Love Song, *Lasst mich allein*.

Ex. 1 Solo from the 2nd movement of Antonín Dvořák's *Cello Concerto* as a quotation from his Op. 82, No. 1 Love Song, *Lasst mich allein*.

What this means is not, however, the subject of much agreement, with some believing the passage should be taken as “pure music,” and others insisting that biographical details involving Dvořák's sister-in-law actually matter. My interest here is not in establishing the case one way or the other, but in what the stakes of such passages are for the way we understand musical works. Most systems of musical analysis of which I am aware

insist that the value of musical material to the analyst depends fundamentally on such things as the relationship between the parts of the composition, contrapuntal motion, or harmonic strategies; not in the relationship of a particular passage to any personal meaning it might have for its creator or any particular person who engages with it. In fact, when I mentioned this issue to a particularly astute theorist recently he said, “*Well then, perhaps such things are not a problem for music analysis.*” That gave me a good deal to think about, but even before getting into this discussion you might argue that we cannot even be sure that this cello solo, related to *Lasst mich allein*, actually has any important meaning, and what such meaning is, and therefore to raise this issue can be at best deceptive and at worst a distracting waste of time.

So I would like to restart the inquiry by looking, not at a piece of music, but rather a short snippet of film, to locate such a moment about whose meaning there is somewhat less doubt. It is well known that the actor Hugo Haas emigrated to the United States and had a successful career, first as an actor and later as producer-director-writer of B-movies. I would like to focus on a snippet from Haas’ 1951 film, *Girl on the Bridge*. To set the context for this scene, David, an elderly watchmaker and Holocaust survivor rescues a young girl, Clara, who is about to kill herself by leaping off a bridge. She goes to work for him, and eventually they get married. Their domestic life is shattered when Clara’s former lover, Mario and Mario’s cousin Harry appear. Harry, the cousin, tries to blackmail David and the old watchmaker kills him unintentionally during a fight. David dumps the body, and when it eventually turns up, Mario, Clara’s former boyfriend is blamed for the crime and put in jail. The guilt of this begins to weigh heavily on David. In the following scene the two of discuss the matter. Clara says, “*You know David, I can’t help thinking about it all the time,*” and after a pause “*How desperate he must feel sitting there hopelessly.*” The watchmaker, seemingly without explanation, loses his temper in a vicious manner shouting: “*Don’t talk about him like that.*” Of course in the context of the film it is David’s guilt speaking, since he’s responsible for the imprisonment of an innocent man, but even that does not account for the volcanic nature of his outburst. In a moment that certainly escapes most of the original viewers who saw it, or more recent audience on YouTube, and was probably meant to escape them, there’s another kind of cinema going on. If one looks closely on the piano as David passes by there is a small photo of Pavel Haas with a black band across the frame.

I am grateful to Milan Hain for pointing this out and sharing with me his article *Hollywood Film as Therapy: Hugo Haas, Trauma, and Survivor Guilt* as well as his paper on Hugo Haas delivered at the Pavel Haas Study Day in Cardiff several years ago. His investigation and discussion of both Hugo’s career as a B-movie director in Hollywood, as well as his devastating reaction to Pavel’s death, allows me to make several observations about the class of double meanings that are the subject of my study, this time in cinema; meanings which are potentially both unsettling and revealing.

Hain says about this passage:

It has no narrative function and not once is it picked up by the camera (e.g. in a close-up), emphasized through the composition of the *mise-en-scène* or referred to in the dialogue. In

other words, the photograph has no relationship whatsoever to the fictional world depicted in the film; it has no bearing on the events portrayed or recounted by any of the characters... *Its meaning cannot be determined within the fictional world of the story, but only if we step outside of it.* [italics by M. B.]

To be more specific, the moment has nothing to do with the plot, but everything to do with the words, “*How desperate he must feel sitting there hopelessly*” him in this case, being Hugo’s brother Pavel, not Mario, the ex-boyfriend.

Milan Hain writes eloquently in his article about survivor guilt and the issue of trauma. And while I find such explanations suggestive, I find it increasingly hard to speak in terms of artistic intentions, preferring rather to speak about actions, finished products, and things whenever possible. So Hugo Haas has *made* something, and whether it was his survivor guilt which consciously or unconsciously created these associations, or whether it was a matter of a more “objective,” artistic craft and subtlety cannot be ascertained; nor can we say exactly what such a moment “means,” but such moments do test our theories of what art is, what it can do, and how it works. Because it is possible to argue that the entire *purpose* of this particular film is that single moment, and while we could possibly argue the same thing about the song quotation in Dvořák, in Hugo Haas’ film we have a far more definite component of personal and hidden meaning. After all, no one in the world would ever disagree that the photo *is* Hugo’s brother. While we could go along with the notion that analysis does not consider such things, I believe otherwise, because if in the end, any analysis that cannot account for what is perhaps the most important moment in the work must be considered somehow deficient.

To explore this further we shall turn to one of the most powerful moments in Janáček’s *Zápisník zmizelého*, which occurs almost at the beginning. Just after the opening of Song 2, the protagonist asks, both to himself and to us, “*Proč sa tady drží? Proč sa tady drží? ...Proč nejde do světa?*” This could be taken either as a kind of simple annoyance and frustration, as in, “*why is she hanging around here all the time,*” or a more trenchant critique, “*proč nejde do světa.*” Why doesn’t she move around like a nomad, *as she is supposed to* being a Romka? Why is she behaving “like us white folks” and staying in one place? The sequential use of the idea may, depending on the approach of the performer, represent intensification of the sentiment, or because of the descending nature of the sequence, suggest a kind of hopeless resignation. The following measure, “*Proč nejde do světa?*,” emphatically restates the question with a certainty that will become increasingly blurred as the cycle proceeds.

We may note here that Janáček, writing as a “Czech” or “Moravian” composer, is supposedly depicting the Roma, but it is clear from the surrounding biographical material, especially his letters to Kamila, that he has conflated the Jew and the Gypsy. We may further note that such things can be seen in terms of a certain paradox: Roma are not included in the normal *Czech* world, but at least they have a niche if they behave like Roma, i.e. nomadically, dressing colorfully, playing music, telling fortunes. This is not unlike the role of the Czechs in the German speaking world, at least musically, where they are welcomed most warmly when they behave like Czechs and wear “na-

How Desperate He Must Feel Sitting There Helplessly: Jews, Gypsies, Czechs...

proč sa ta - dy dr - ží, proč sa ta - dy
 geht sie noch nicht wei - ter, geht sie noch nicht
 dr - ží, proč ne - jde do svě - ta? Proč nej - de
 wie - ter, nicht in die Welt hin - aus, geht sie noch

Ex. 2 "Proč sa tady drží? Proč sa tady drží? ...Proč nejde do světa?" Leoš Janáček:
 Zápísník zmizelého.

Ru - ce mé, ru ce,
 A - ach wie leer, so leer,
 Hands of mi - ne, my hands,
 kte - rak jste prázd - né, ři - ci to všecho, ři - ci to všech - no!
 sind mei - ne Hän - de, all das zu sa - gen, all das zu sa - gen!
 that are so emp - ty, to say ev - ery - thing, to say ev - ery - thing!

Ex. 3 "Ruce mé, ruce, kterak jste prázdné, řiči to všechno!". Pavel Haas:
 Daleko měsíc je domova.

tional dress” in their music. Whatever the case, Janáček has created a moment of rare power with this passage.

Considering Hugo’s hidden image in *Girl on the Bridge*, it is striking and somewhat jarring to discover that Pavel Haas created a similar kind of moment seven years earlier in the middle of the middle of his song cycle on Chinese poetry. We are speaking of the powerful third song, *Daleko měsíc je domova*, with a text translated and elaborated by Bohumil Mathesius from Zhang Jiuling’s *Gazing at the Moon and Thinking of Someone Far Away*. If Mathesius has, in his own words, *paraphrased*, rather than translated, the original Chinese text, Haas bases the opening material of the song on his own paraphrase of *Svatý Václave*, a melody which appears frequently in his work. Less acknowledged is his use of the musical material of “*Proč sa tady drží*” as a kind of interruption of the somber mood of “*Daleko měsíc*” at the text, “*Ruce mé, ruce, kterak jste prázdné, říci to všechno!*”

I do not believe that it is worth trying to establish whether this was a conscious quotation or a more subliminal recollection, although it is difficult to imagine Haas, in his powerful cycle, not being aware of Janáček’s work and this particular passage.

But it really doesn’t matter, because in this context, Janáček’s notion of “going out into the world,” has a bitterly ironic character. For here the wanderers—be they Wandering Jews in Terezin or Roma, or 9th Century Chinese poets stuck far from home—cannot

The image displays a musical score comparison between two excerpts. The top portion features Janáček's music, marked "Più mosso" and "f", with lyrics in Czech, German, and English. The bottom portion features Haas's music, marked "mpo 1" and "pp", with lyrics in Czech and German. The score includes vocal lines and piano accompaniment with various musical notations such as triplets, dynamics, and articulation marks.

Janáček's Excerpt:
 Più mosso
 f
 Ru - ce mé, ru - ce,
 A - ach wie leer, so leer,
 Hands of mi - ne, my hands,
 proč sa ta - dy dr - ží, proč sa ta - dy
 geht sie noch nicht wei - ter, geht sie noch nicht

Haas's Excerpt:
 mpo 1
 f
 ři - ci to všech - no!
 all das zu sa - gen!
 to say ev - ery - thing!
 proč ne - jde do svě - ta? Proč nej - de
 nicht in die Welt hin - aus, geht sie noch

Ex. 4 Comparison of Janáček's "proč sa tady drží..." and Haas' "ruce mé..." excerpts.

ever go out into the world. The tension between the stasis of the Roma woman in *Zápisník*, and the movement desired of her, in Haas' incarnation becomes an agonized meditation and outcry about enforced motionlessness, the absolute stasis of the imprisoned whose hands are too empty to say anything.

I would like follow up these examples by speaking, somewhat parenthetically about the kinds of thing that make understanding musical works so difficult. Musical works, as we all know, can be grasped on many levels, onion skins to be peeled away. One imagines, in a kind of blunt edged version of this, that while Haas and some of his fellow prisoners may recognize *Svatý Václav* in the third song of the cycle, it was really not meant for the Nazi guards, or perhaps even the Red Cross for whom it was performed. Noting the conflation of Janáček's "*Proč sa tady drží? ...Proč nejde do světa?*" with the empty hands of Haas' bound prisoner is not absolutely necessary for grasping the power of either work, and one could perhaps argue that acknowledging it consciously disrupts our engagement with the work. But one cannot deny its power as both a musical, intellectual and symbolic thing. Nothing is ever simple though, and before leaving this passage in Haas' song, I would like to throw a small wrench into the works. We have noted that the song is virtually saturated with the *Svatý Václav* motive, and we *could* argue that his so-called "quote" of Janáček merely paraphrases its first notes. Further, Haas uses a similar motive in at least two other places: the *Con fuoco* movement of his *Suite for Oboe* and at the end of *Šarlatán*:



Ex. 5 Pavel Haas: *Con fuoco* movement of his *Suite for Oboe* (excerpt).



Ex. 6 Pavel Haas: *Šarlatán* (excerpt from the opera finale).

And here they all are together:

proč sa ta - dy dr - ží,

1. Sva - tý

Ex. 7 Comparative figure of Janáček's and Haas' motivic affinity of the above mentioned works.

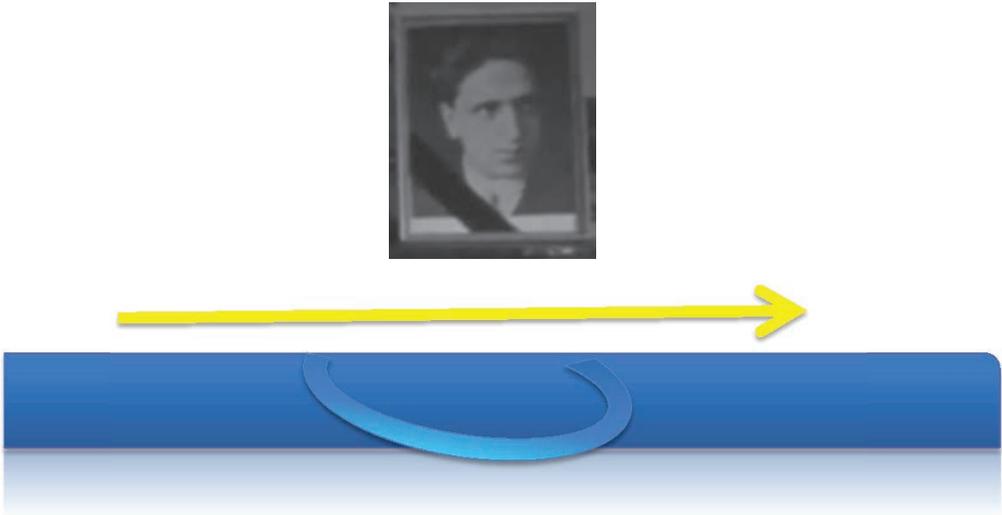
Does this mean that “*Ruce mé*” is *not* a quote from Janáček, or rather that this particular passage from *Zápisník* is even *more* critical to Haas’ thinking? Let us remember, that we have no doubt about whether or not Haas quotes *Svatý Václav* in several compositions; if he’s quoting one piece several times, why not another, and perhaps for varied reasons each time.

Even if you agree that anyone who conflates the moment in *Zápisník* with Haas “*Ruce mé*” probably has a different understanding of Haas’ song, what does it actually matter for the identity of the piece, since only the tiniest fraction of listeners and performers will make those associations? My view is fairly extreme and, as you might imagine, is derived from Hugo’s film: even if we are speaking of an audience of one, that still matters to how we understand the work. I have taken to calling this, “*The Doctrine of One*,” which argues that something that might mean nothing to one listener might mean everything to another. And of course it follows that overly prescriptive approaches to “listening” while not entirely without value, can be deeply misleading.

This also points up something which to which I have already referred. Music analysis can provide fascinating insights about certain kinds of things but does not, by and large deliver much insight when trying to understand such passages. Moments like “*Ruce mé*”

may upend conventional notions of form, which tend to concentrate on the movement from beginning to ending, i.e. the “narrative”. A “*Ruce mē*” or “Pavel on the Piano” gesture suggests that one short, “throwaway,” moment in the middle may be what the piece is really “about.”

Here are some representations of what I am speaking about in terms of simple formal diagram. The first acknowledges the presence of suggestive material in the center, but basically follows the arrow from beginning to end.

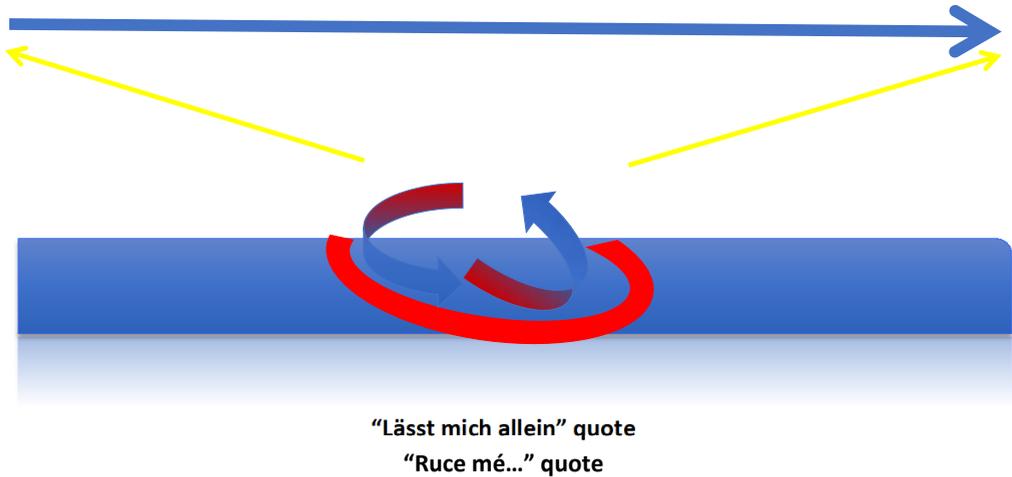


“*Lässt mich allein*” quote

“*Ruce mé...*” quote

Ex. 8 Formal diagram of the narrative.

The second, suggests that even as the piece does move “forward,” it also moves outwards, forward and back, from the middle, and plays a fundamental role in the way we come to process the piece in our imagination after it has concluded.



Ex. 9 Formal diagram of the narrative

I would like to conclude by saying that even though “intention” may be involved, the importance of such material does not depend entirely on intention. Whether Janáček and Kalda are “teaming up” to simply create a moment where the young farm boy says, “*I wish she would get out of here,*” or making a more profound comment about Romani nomadism; whether Pavel Haas consciously quotes Janáček to conflate the nomadic Gypsy and the imprisoned Jew, whether Hugo is “simply” memorializing his brother, or on the other hand, creating an entirely new kind of cinema based on intricate double meanings—Noir noir, let us call it; or whether in the end Dvořák’s recollection of *Lasst mich allein* has nothing—or everything—to do with Josefina, these questions about the relationship of music to the rest of the world will never go away quietly, but require us to continually rethink the nature of the enterprise.

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