

MY MORAVIAN ROOTS NEVER SLEEP

An Interview with Mezzo-soprano

Magdalena Kožená

Magdalena Kožená is a Czech mezzo-soprano who has spent the last three decades on opera and concert stages around the world. Her career took off with a bang in 1995 when she won the International Mozart Competition in Salzburg, and since then, she has performed with orchestras including the Berlin, Vienna, and Czech Philharmonics and at houses including the Opéra Comique, the Bavarian State Opera, and the MET. This interview is based on an episode of Philharmonious, the podcast of the Czech Philharmonic, which is also available for streaming.

Magdalena, your new album, Czech Songs, opens with settings of Japanese folk songs by Bohuslav Martinů, a composer who spent much of his life in France and later the United States. Music has also made you a globetrotter, and you now you live in Berlin. When do you feel your Moravian roots are awakened the strongest?

I must say, I think my Moravian roots are awake all day and every day, though I have now lived abroad for twenty years, and if you add traveling, that probably makes me something of a cosmopolitan global citizen. I have had the opportunity to understand other cultures at a deeper level, really spend time with people of different nations, which is very enriching. But still, if you play me the first ten bars of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*, my whole being just jumps at it, and I feel this is where I belong. I feel truly Moravian.

And you never felt like you were at a risk of losing this while living abroad?

No, I must say I never did. I speak to my kids in Czech, and I have a lot of very, very deep connections with friends and with my country for so many reasons, so it was always a huge part of my life. And these links are only getting stronger now – the older



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I am, the more I feel the need to come back more often, and strengthen the foundation I have here. It's not only concerts, work, and meeting friends - I also feel I want to do something good for this country.

We started ZUŠ Open seven years ago (*ZUŠ - základní umělecká škola, elementary art school, a very dense network of highly accessible art schools for children and youth - translator's note*). The main aim of the foundation was to inform people in this country about the wonderful system we have here, because many take it for granted - they think it's the same everywhere.

But I know from living in Germany that if my kids wanted to study music after school, or do drawing or dance, there are no schools like that. You usually go to private teachers, or you have very small specialised schools. But you know, this system where every child who is somewhat talented and has some desire to make art has the opportunity, it's something we have to treasure. So the main focus was on telling people how wonderful it is.

Over these past seven years, we have developed a highly successful festival, where the kids can present what they learnt. Now we are also starting new social programmes, aiming to support groups that are financially or otherwise disadvantaged. My main goal, of course, is to nurture exceptional talents and present them, but that's not all. We want to show that art is for everyone, for people who are not going to be musicians or dancers or photographers, but people who will go on to be important figures in public life or go on to build the cultural foundation of the nation.

You've mentioned already that when you hear Janáček's Sinfonietta, you feel right at home. When you hear the words "Czech music", what is it that comes to mind? Is it folk music or orchestral music? What do you hear?

When you say "Czech music", people usually imagine the famous trio: Dvořák, Martinů, Janáček, and there are good reasons for that, of course. But we can go further – we can start in the Baroque with Adam Michna z Otradovic, Jan Dismas Zelenka, and Jan Václav Hugo Voříšek, continue through the more famous Romantic period, and then end with Ondřej Adámek and Miroslav Srnka. For me, "Czech music" is an extremely broad category that includes many different styles. So what first comes to my mind when I hear those words is that there is so much undiscovered and beautiful music that I would love to present to the world. I'd love to open that treasure box. And so every time I have the possibility, I do something new; something less famous.

And how is this different if we say Moravian music instead of Czech music?

Moravian music already has connotations of folklore. And obviously, Janáček is a kind of milestone in this approach, and he spent a large part of his life nurturing folklore; accompanying choirs, making arrangements of folk songs... They were a tremendous inspiration to him. I believe he is one of our most unique and original composers. Of course I'm very proud that I'm Moravian as well, but on the other hand, Janáček is simply his own genius.

I think you're right not only about elementary art schools – there's a general tendency for Czechs to underestimate and fail to appreciate a lot of what we have. It's great that we have ambassadors like you to then present it to the world, and Janáček is a good example.

Yeah, I think it's wonderful that the first person to present so many Janáček operas in England was Sir Charles Mackerras. He was an Australian who fell in love with the Czech tradition. He even learned Czech and spoke it excellently. He was the one who said: "Look, this is absolutely extraordinary."

You recently recorded an album with the Czech Philharmonic that features a few cycles of folk songs from around the world. Do these projects make you feel like a musical globetrotter? Do you travel the world musically when you perform repertoire like this?

For this particular CD, I was inspired by Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs* cycle, in which he brought together eleven folk songs from completely different parts of the world. He started in the United States and then traveled through Sicily, France, and England only to finish in Azerbaijan. Each song is in a different language, not even language, but dialect. And I started thinking: why not take this idea further? My aim was to create sort of a tasting menu, let's say, of folk songs. So I chose some fairly unusual songs by Xavier Montsalvatge, a Catalan composer who combined Cuban rhythms and melodies with Spanish music. Then there is a marvellous setting of Greek songs - although they are sung in French, the songs are originally from Greece. And finally, an extraordinary song cycle by Béla Bartók that I think is a complete masterpiece. It was only recorded twice by a Hungarian singer. The material we got wasn't even printed, it was handwritten, not quite legible. So it took a lot of work to find the right notes and harmonies. This is a CD where everyone can find a dish to suit them, and maybe it will arouse curiosity and lead listeners to explore more of the music of that part of the world.

And do you feel that it's possible, in such a context, to capture something of the authenticity of these kind of folk musics? Is it feasible to present so many tasting menus in the course of one hour?

These composers really studied the music deeply. While these are their original arrangements of the folk songs, each of them tried to preserve the original. I'm sure they heard how it was sung in that village, had recordings, or even traveled there themselves and heard the people making this music authentically. And then, of course, they tried to transcribe it into their own musical language. But I feel that each of them has a special atmosphere, and with the Greek songs, for instance, you can smell the hot air - or at least I can.

Speaking of authenticity - you perform both concerts and operas. Which do you find more authentic for you?

The two roles complement each other. So it would be almost impossible to choose one. Obviously, opera is the most complex art form that combines music, theatre, dance, and visual art. So if you are part of a production where everything clicks together, this is incredibly satisfying and one of the highest possible achievements. On the other hand, concerts have a crucial quality for me, which is the contact with the public. In the opera, you play a role. The auditorium is dark. There is this one world, that of the play; the opera, and you know that people are watching you. But they are, in a way, not part of it as much as in a concert, where you can see their faces, their reactions. There is something very special about it - you know, I can sit in my studio for hours and think about this phrase I want to do, the way I want to colour it, where I want to breathe, what emotion I want to express. And then I'm on stage and it's usually completely different, and it also changes from evening to evening. It depends on the energy, the atmosphere that is created between you and the public. And that's something I really love.

And in terms of the professional aspect of it, the preparation, the time management, do they also complement each other? Does opera allow you to stay in one place for longer so you can rest a little?

Yes, those are two very different situations. With a new opera production, you usually spend five or six weeks in one place, you rehearse, you get to know your colleagues and



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Performing with Simon Rattle

so on. Perhaps you can even just wander around the city and not be merely a passenger running from place to place, which is how you feel on a concert tour. On the other hand, you can prepare for the concert at home, which is something that you appreciate especially if you have a family.

And for me, there is one other important type of event: recitals with piano. That's a completely different experience from singing with a symphony orchestra. It's an art form I'm really fighting for, and not just me - I have many colleagues, both singers and pianists, who are doing the same, as it's not an easy thing to sell in this day and age, when we are not used to concentrating so much. Of course, I can't speak for everyone, but my children's generation, for instance, they don't read books very often, and they're not too interested in things like poetry. And the Liederabend - evening of songs - is something that requires quite a sophisticated audience who comes prepared to the concert, because they know they can enjoy it a lot more if they know the poems in advance.

Recitals are incredibly important for young singers, because this is where you learn to work with text, where you really compose your own programme. Every little detail has to be thought through. Many young singers don't feel like putting in so much work and then be naked, with only them and the piano on stage. But I believe it is essential for a singer's vocal, artistic, and personal development.

It seems like what makes it difficult are the same things that makes it important.

Precisely.

Do you find that that is something that you're considering increasingly important as your career develops - an increased focus on this intimate, authentic setting rather than the big orchestra?



*In the title role of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée**

It was always this way. But I feel a particular necessity in our days when this art form is less and less in demand. And this is not right - if you just take the German Lieder tradition, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, for example. There are so many songs, I would never be able to learn them in a lifetime. The vast amount of unbelievable music there is amazing.

Another one of your recent CDs with the Czech Philharmonic concludes with a lullaby by Gideon Klein. Who sang lullabies to you and what were they?

My mother - she sang all the time, while she was cooking, ironing, cleaning... I don't remember any particular lullabies, but there were always folk songs in the house. Something very special for me was the summer holidays me and my sister would spend at our grandparents' house. We would usually play cards together in the evening, singing. I learned a lot of songs and started improvising second and third voices. This combination of music I love and memories of my beloved grandparents is something that has always stayed with me.

And were these then also the songs that you sang to your own children? Was your own household like this?

Yes, I sang to all three of my children when they were little, to put them to sleep. My first son in particular used to take ages to fall asleep. So usually, after an hour and a half of folk songs, I would run out. And then I'd begin singing all my recital repertoire. Debussy, Ravel - he didn't mind, just as long as I kept singing.

And just to go back to the beginning, we spoke about these art schools for children in the Czech Republic. It is often the case that children have quite a personal and spontaneous relationship with music. But then they go to this school and they are given a violin, scales to practice, and an exercise regimen. I know that your experience was a little bit like this as well...



Oh absolutely, it was very demanding, almost like sports.

So I suppose it worked for you - you kept at it and never gave up. But for a lot of other people, it can ruin their relationship with music. Do you think there's some middle ground to be found?

There are definitely two sides to this. Of course, I was crazy about music, so I was a little bit strange or unusual in that I didn't really want to go play outside with my friends. My parents had to tell me: "Stop playing, go and eat, do something else!"

If you want to be a professional, this passion is very important, as this job isn't easy and it isn't just about making music. You really have to *want* to do it to go through with all of it. But it also really depends on the teacher. Having good teachers, and making sure they are appreciated (including good pay and social recognition) is another one of our foundation's goals.

And ultimately, many people also treasure the drill and diligence of practicing scales. I've heard this story a few times: people stop after a few years, usually during puberty. And later, they'll say: "Oh, I wish my teacher had forced me. Then I'd be so much better now!" So it's always about finding the right balance - being strict but not too harsh, and also inviting freedom of expression. And crucially, the goal shouldn't be to turn every student into a professional musician. The aim should be to teach people how to enjoy music, which is an aspect I still believe is somewhat lacking.



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