

Max Dvořák in the 1960s: a re-construction of tradition

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The conference where this contribution was presented was convened to remember the one hundredth anniversary of Max Dvořák's demise. Should that suggest that in comparison to his birth, the date of his death may have some kind of special importance? In a way, it really has. Dvořák died aged only 47 in 1921 and is thus set apart from his Vienna schoolmates who became influential personalities of Czech art history: Vojtěch Birnbaum became the professor at Charles' University and died in 1934 aged 57, while Vincenc Kramář established the National Gallery and died aged 83 only in 1960. In contrast to them, Dvořák's image remains located in fin-de-siècle Vienna and the years of the Great War. He was present during the twentieth century rather through the re-presentations and interpretations of his students, like Hans Sedlmayr in Austria.

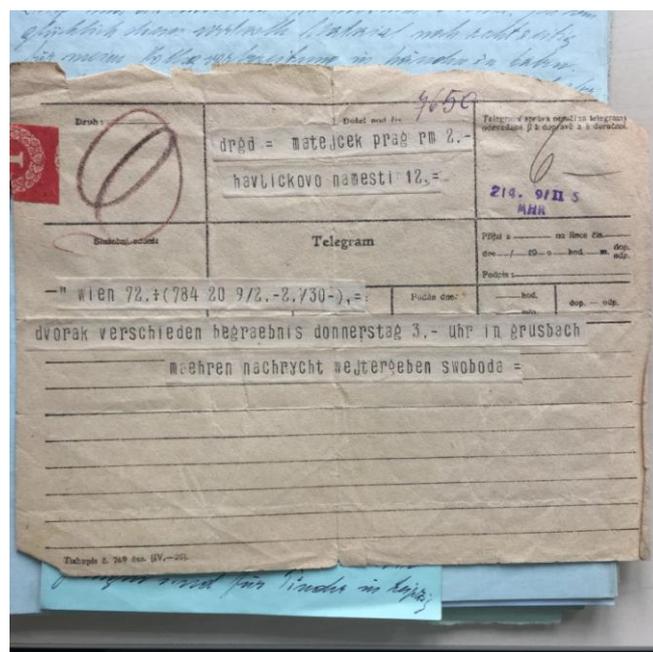


Figure 1 Telegram information on Dvořák's death, from Karl M. Swoboda to A. Matějček, 9 February 1921. National Gallery in Prague, Documentation Department, coll. AA3571 – Antonín Matějček papers, incoming correspondence.

From the Czech point of view, his death truly is the more important date. The fact that Dvořák lies buried in what is today the Czech Republic, is a result of historical coincidence. He lived and Vienna and died unexpectedly during a visit to the castle of his friend and supporter Karl Khnun-Belasi [fig. 1]. Yet it was the accidental location of his grave in Hrušovany /Grussbach that provided a substantial backup for the revival of Czech art historical interest in the Viennese

professor on the fortieth anniversary of his death in 1961. Outside Czechoslovakia, the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century marked a low point of interest in the scholar whose idealistic concept of art history and human society 'turned out to be nothing more than wishful thinking', as Ján Bakoš remarked on the occasion of the last anniversary in 2011. According to Bakoš, before the first revival of interest in his ideas after the twenty fifth CIHA congress in Vienna in 1983, Dvořák had been a figure of an outdated past. Only Austrian and Czech and some Italian art historians would venerate his legacy on the different occasions of his anniversaries. Austrian and Czech art historical communities acknowledged his works mainly for patriotic reasons since Dvořák was regarded as one of the key figures of modern Austrian as well as Czech art history.¹

Bakoš situated the revival of interest in Dvořák in Czech art history in the sixties and seventies in the context of the promotion of iconology and reactions to its success. The rehabilitation of Dvořák in 1961, however, had a much wider and more profound significance for Czech art history. Dvořák could be used as the main support in the struggle to overcome the backward pull of Stalinist ideology. In the following I would like to show how events in early sixties secured the very special position Dvořák has acquired and retained ever since as the key founding father of Czech art history. Or shouldn't we rather speak about its mythical hero?²

The commemorative meeting over Dvořák's grave on 8 February 1961 [fig. 2] was a carefully planned occasion. It was organized by the Institute of Art History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, an institution founded on the Soviet model in 1952 and designed to overshadow the traditional scholarly centres at the universities. Jaromír Neumann, the leading figure of the period and an associate professor at the Charles' University, became director of the Institute in 1960.³ The rehabilitation of Dvořák was his token of a substantial turn in the Institute's strategy towards emphasis on theory and methodology. One of the intentions behind the new evaluation of Dvořák was to justify the freshly introduced iconology as an approach that was not imported but could be derived independently from the Czech intellectual tradition. This highly original concept was conceived by Rudolf Chadraba, whom Neumann hired and collaborated with him to develop a specific Marxist iconology.⁴ Beyond the issue of iconology, however, Neumann saw a return

¹ Ján Bakoš, 'Dvořák's legacy after ninety years', *Ars* 44:2011, 3–7.

² For the patrilinear structure of Czech art historical tradition see also Milena Bartlová, 'Continuity and discontinuity in the Czech legacy of the Vienna school of art history', *Journal of Art Historiography* Nr 8, June 2013.

³ The present contribution relies on the research presented in my book Milena Bartlová, *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969* [History of Czech Art History 1945–1969] Praha: UMPRUM, 2020. For the fifties, see in English Milena Bartlová, 'New Political Orientation of Czech Art History around 1950', on: Krista Kodres – Kristina Jöekalda – Michaela Marek (eds.), *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades*. Wien-Köln-Weimar: Böhlau, 2019, 36–56.

⁴ My preliminary consideration on Jaromír Neumann, iconology and Marxism was published as Milena Bartlová, 'Czech art history and Marxism', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Nr 7, December 2012. The recent book (as Note 5) presents a much revised and expanded reconsideration. For a brief English summary, see Milena Bartlová, 'The Prague School of



Figure 2 Meeting at Dvořák's grave in Hrušovany/Grussbach, 8 November 1961 (photo Jakub Pavel). Members of the Communist Young Pioneers honour the grave, to the right standing are Jaromír Pečírka (facing) and Jaromír Neumann (in profile).

Archives of the Vienna University, Max Dvořák papers.

to Dvořák as a way to construct a firm ground that would sustain recognition of art history as an autonomous science that cannot and will not accommodate a Marxist-Leninist chronology devised by historical materialism as based on the changes of social and economic formations. The mission was successful and it secured a specific status for Czech art history in the ensuing decades, not only in the framework of specialized discourse but also in the general intellectual debate of the Post-Stalinist period in the sixties and beyond.

There was a previous rebuff that had to be removed. Ten years before the fortieth anniversary, the same Neumann in his younger, Stalinist, self had proclaimed a stern verdict over Dvořák's idealism, although the main object of the ideological refutation in 1951 had been Birnbaum. Also, in 1961 Dvořák had to be rescued from the context of *Geistesgeschichte*, a movement associated in the Czech academy primarily with Catholic historiographers, some of whom were only released from political prison a year before. In order to achieve this, Dvořák's

Marxist Iconology', in: Magdalena Kuřinska – Wojciech Balus (eds.), *Iconologies between East and West* (forthcoming).

attempt to establish naturalism and idealism as another twin set of generally valid interpretive terms for art history was recast not as a dualism but in terms of dialectic. As Neumann remarked in the speech over Dvořák's grave, 'for Czech art history, the task to reinterpret Dvořák is an assignment similar to the Marxists' move to turn Hegel back from head to his feet; Hegel, that is, to whom Dvořák himself, in a way, also referred'.⁵ The issue of dialectics was enough to label Dvořák as a 'progressive' thinker, that is, in period terms, a thinker who was not a Marxist, but was not inimical to Marxism. Such reinterpretation was, admittedly, rather weak philosophically, especially if we take into account that dialectics represented one of the key issues debated by Czech Marxist philosophers, most prominently by Robert Kalivoda and Karel Kosík, who in 1961 had just completed his internationally acclaimed book *Dialectics of the Concrete*.⁶ In order to boost the reinterpretation of Dvořák, Neumann and Chadřaba arranged for a rediscovery of hitherto unknown documents in the archives of the Vienna University that were introduced to support the move in the role of a hidden witness. Part of the documentation was published to commemorate the next anniversary in 1971.⁷ By then it was safe to reveal that the notes for lectures do not, in fact, contain anything intellectually significant and that was why they were left out of the collected writings edited after Dvořák's death by Swoboda and Wilde.

The re-constitution of Dvořák as the authoritative reference for Czech art historical thinking in the early sixties had also, however, a real and powerful significance. According to the new interpretation, the proper object of art historical cognition achieved through empathy into artistic forms, namely the developments of period spirit and spirituality, were now to be substituted by the developments of period ideology. In this way, art history obtained a valuable tool that was able to bring forth a unique knowledge that remained inaccessible to historical materialism. The most important historical subject in this regard was the Czech speaking non-elite and uneducated people, or folk, in medieval and early modern periods, whose ideology or *Weltanschauung* was scarcely documented in a written form. The operation may sound rather skewed today but it can arguably be considered a legitimate possibility for a development of Dvořák's concept of a general ideological transparency of an artwork. This point was sharply, if critically, recognized by the non-Marxist Václav Richter in his unpublished text on Birnbaum written in 1959. Richter pointed out that

Birnbaum was in fact no formalist. He just insisted that an artwork is always also a material creation, an object. An artwork will remain heavily undervalued if it serves as a document for cultural politics. It will be

⁵ Rudolf Chadřaba, 'K výročí úmrtí Maxe Dvořáka' [On the Anniversary of Max Dvořák's Death], *Umění* 9:1961, 312–313.

⁶ Karel Kosík, *Dialektika konkrétního. Studie o problematice člověka a světa*. [Dialectics of the concrete. A study on problems of man and world], Praha: ČSAV 1963. Before 1968, two additional printings appeared. Between 1967 and 1977 the book was translated into eleven languages, a Russian translation was published in 2003. An English translation of a volume of contemporary evaluations of the book appears at the Brill in October 2021.

⁷ Rudolf Chadřaba, 'Inedita Maxe Dvořáka', *Umění* 19:1971, 618–627.

interpreted one-sidedly if its ideological transparency will be given preference according to the neo-idealism of Max Dvořák, as well as if its relationship to the rules of economy will be preferred according to vulgar materialism.⁸

The main event of the 1961 anniversary was a conference organized by the Academy of Sciences. Let us keep in mind that the medium of scholarly conference in the Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia at the time still retained the Stalinist character of functioning rather as a platform for the announcement of new ideological norms than as a site of open intellectual debate. Because of that, the contribution by Jaromír Pečírka was excluded from the published collection. The inter-war editor of Czech translations of Dvořák's texts and keeper of his memory, seventy-years-old Pečírka, moved the participants of the commemoration in the Grussbach graveyard when he recalled the 'truly noble, attractive, enchanting and harmonious personality', but his insistence on Dvořák's humanist idealism was not, at the moment, the preferred discourse.⁹ The contributions at the conference represented Dvořák as the new authority for Post-Stalinist methodology that would give more space for free artistic imagination. Dvořák was introduced as the starting point for Marxist iconology and at the same time as a prop for its opponents. The re-interpretation of Dvořák was also brought up to support the assertion that the theory of monuments' care should 'take into account first of all an ideological content of the heritage'.¹⁰

The operation proved totally successful. Ten years later, on the occasion of another anniversary of Dvořák's death in 1971, Neumann had already been banished from the Institute and even from appearance in scholarly journal because he was an object of the post-Prague Spring purges. Those who remained were able to confirm, however, that Max Dvořák had acquired his position as the firm basis for Czech art history, a fully autonomous scientific field that brings a valuable and unique knowledge of history.¹¹ Already in 1965, the turn to embrace Dvořák and confirm the tradition of the Vienna school in Czech art history was summed up from an authoritative position as follows: 'Art history after the Second World War represented mostly a continuation of the methods used during the inter-war decades. Marxism asserted itself only slowly and tentatively. The fact was, however, that Czechoslovak art history had rarely ever been purely formalist and it had never abandoned its attention to historical circumstances of artistic production. Thus, a transition toward progressive art history did not entail a sharp turn, but rather an

⁸ Václav Richter, *Přítomnost Vojtěcha Birnbauma [Vojtěch Birnabum's presence]*, manuscript, 1959. Archives of the Masaryk University in Brno, coll. B42 V. Richter, box 5, Nr 139.

⁹ Chadraba, *K výročí úmrtí*.

¹⁰ Papers from the conference were published in *Umění* 9:1961, 525–612. Quote from Viktor Kotrba, 'Max Dvořák a ochrana památek v českých zemích' [Max Dvořák and Heritage Care in the Czech Lands], *Umění* 9:1961, 639.

¹¹ Albert Kotal, 'Padesát let od smrti Maxe Dvořáka' [Fiftieth Anniversary of Max Dvořák's Death], *Umění* 19:1971, 612–614; Petr Wittlich, 'Projev na vzpomínkovém večeru katedry dějin umění FF UK' [Speech at the commemoration meeting of the Department of art history, Faculty of Arts, Charles' University], *Umění* 19:1971, 615–618.

intensification and enrichment of working methods established by the Vienna school of art history, methods that are often called positivist today.¹² In other words, Czech art history had no need for Marxist or social approaches, because its own prominent features had already been present in Max Dvořák's legacy and the Viennese tradition.

I would like to suggest that Max Dvořák was established during the sixties and early seventies as the true authority of Czech art history in both directions, namely the neo-positivist and iconological approaches. The key moment was the fact that references to him symbolized a humanist mission for art history. This happened during the decades when Dvořák was of little interest elsewhere, perhaps aside from Poland. The full appreciation of his authority was a truly home affair. The successful operation had some rather powerful side effects. From the Czech point of view, Dvořák's retrospective naturalization eclipsed his international relevance. The new wave of international interest in the second half of the eighties coincided with the publication of the authoritative *Chapters from the History of Czech Art History*, where Chadřaba's two long chapters on Dvořák and his influence codified the locally specific image. The young Dvořák and the mature one were, together, able to represent an authority for both neo-positivism and iconology. In Chadřaba's original synthesis, Dvořák and Strzygowski could reach harmony, a hybrid solution if there ever was one.¹³ After 1990, the universalist orientation expanded to include a religious, Catholic content now recognized in Dvořák's history of art as a history spirit – in fact, following Sedlmayr's interpretation.

To put it briefly: Interpretation is the message. The practice of 'soft' interpretation methods coined by Sedlmayr, which prefer analogies to differences and value intuition rather than analysis, as well as their twofold direction made it possible to refer to Dvořák's authority almost for anything. In this respect, the Czech version of Dvořák might really be considered a semblance of a mythical ancestor. For the Czech student of art history, the paradigmatic stature of Dvořák makes it difficult to recognize that his texts and ideas might in fact have been an inspirational site of revealing ruptures.

This text was written with the institutional support of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague.

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¹² František Matouš, 'Teorie a dějiny umění 1945–1965' [Art History and Theory 1945–1965], *Umění* 11:1965, 217–232.

¹³ Rudolf Chadřaba, 'Max Dvořák a vídeňská škola dějin umění' [Max Dvořák and the Vienna school of art history], in: Rudolf Chadřaba et al., *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění* vol. II, Praha: Academia, 1987, 9–70.

field is *Unsere 'nationale' Kunst* (2016). This conference contribution also draws on results of the extensive monograph *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945-1969* (2020). An English translation *History of Czech Art History 1945-1969* is under preparation and a sequel project (1970-1990) is planned.

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