

Velvet Revolution: Petr Eben's complete solo works for organ

Volume 1 Companion Essay

Throughout the distinguished career of Czech composer Petr Eben the organ maintained a position of honor. As he said to me, the instrument “. . . was always pure joy . . . the dearest instrument to me, full of festivity.”¹ A self-proclaimed Romantic, Eben never failed to place his prodigious compositional technique at the service of the music. In discussing his artistic aesthetic, he once said, “I strongly felt music to be a message to the listener and a composition was, for me, always more than a problem to solve in a musical way.”² Those who know his music recognize that the frequent message is that Good will triumph over Evil, despite the follies of humankind.

Disc 1: A Voice Crying in the Wilderness - Works of the Young Composer

Nedeľní Hudba (“Sunday Music”) was published only thirteen years after Petr Eben endured Nazi internment, and the anguish of that experience finds a remarkably well- formed, mature voice in this, his first solo work for organ. The title of this four-movement symphonic work escaped the communist censor; had they known the hidden message revealed many years later it never would have been published.

The sweeping Fantasia I is a bold and virtuosic continuous development of the Kyrie Orbis Factor, “Lord, have mercy upon us,” a well-known chant for Ordinary Sundays. The emotional range here is enormous: urgent imploration is overtaken by a playful (or mocking?) diversion before moving back to imploration. A virtuosic cadenza leads to a final solemn declaration, setting the scene for the more expressive second movement. Fantasia II opens with a mysterious, sinuous melody that leads to a “carillon” theme. This is combined with the Kyrie Orbis Factor heard previously, the pealing bells proclaiming our need for mercy. As the organ waxes and wanes, we return to the opening music, accompanied by the chiming of distant bells.

Moto Ostinato remains the composer's most popular organ work. Although effective as a stand-alone work, here we appreciate not only its function as the scherzo of this “symphony,” but its role in setting the stage for a spiritual battle. It was inspired by one of the New Testament's most terrifying scenes – the story of Christ's encounter with demons who possessed an innocent man. “My name is Legion, for we are many.” Mark 5:9 A menacing theme grows increasingly sinister until the entire texture is engulfed by the frenzied ostinato. Electrifying stereophonic effects on the final page are achieved by rapid manual changes, perhaps depicting the swine tumbling off a cliff, as the scripture states in subsequent verses.

Finale is the reaction to the demonic taunt of Moto Ostinato. The opening trumpet theme is, in the composer's words, “. . . a call to all the positive forces of the human character to rise and fight again for what is good.”³ A crescendo leads to a subito decrescendo and the entrance of

the Easter Vigil's Kyrie Lux et origo. We enter battle asking for mercy in the sure knowledge of Christ's victory over Death. The development of both themes ultimately leads to the return of the opening theme, marching troops closer and closer to the front line. The concluding Salve Regina leaves no doubt that Good has won the day.

"The central idea of the cycle *Laudes* (1964) was . . . the realization that the present century is an age of deep ingratitude. . . Hence the 'Laudes' of the title."⁴ Eben's experimentation with new approaches is apparent in his reliance on motivic compression and derivation, as well as a more angular, less consonant, harmonic vocabulary. While this may seem incongruous with earlier works, it reflects a maturation process in which he experimented with new avenues of pitch, rhythm and formal organization, while not abandoning his trademark lyricism, idiomatic virtuosity, and interest in timbre.

Laudes I opens with a majestic gesture that challenges us to praise our Creator as God deserves. In the ensuing "praise" section, based on the Easter Alleluia, the composer uses a compression technique wherein the chant's intervals are packed tightly, expanding with every repetition, until the pedal enters with the theme in its original form, accompanied by the opening thematic material and concluding with a resounding "Alleluia!"

Laudes II evokes the mystery of the Holy Trinity in the double-pedal Gregorian Doxology and scampering manual passages with strange, unearthly timbres. The "praise" section roars in on a forceful tidal wave; in contrast to the opening, this places us on very earthly terrain through Eben's use of the rumba rhythm. We end with a holy dance, Three Persons of the Trinity swaying in time until the secret silence unexpectedly returns.

In *Laudes III* Eben combines diverse musical elements - jazz trumpet solo, ground bass, pitch stasis and the sequence *Lauda Sion* - to evoke the "Mysterious presence of God." The chant is stated on a registration providing all of the pitches of the musical triad (8, 2 2/3' and 1 3/5'), surrounded by interjections of rushing notes in right hand and pedal. After a strictly organized section that layers pedal ostinato with quirky staccato chords, the "praise" section takes over: dreamy chant-based solos against ostinato figures lead to a jubilant solo for jazz trumpet.

Laudes IV opens with dark, mysterious chords Eben likened to a "threatening depression." The Easter chant *Christus vincit, Christus regnat* forms the material here; first stated brutally in the pedal, then gently developed under staccato figuration, fragmented, and increasingly agitated, it ultimately leads to a thrilling "praise" section marked by rapid timbral contrasts. Chant majestically emerges from the battle - the triumph of Christ is sure, but the battle was fierce.

Written for the 1972 Prague Spring Music festival, *Fantasie Corali I* and *II* represent a new synthesis in the composer's style that is a melding of approaches seen in the previous two works. The rather strict variation form of *Fantasie I* develops the Bohemian Brethren chorale *O Grosser Gott*, while *Fantasie II* is truer to the "fantasia" title in its development of the coronation hymn, *Svatý Vaclav*. Both feature what have become by this point "signature"

techniques: bi-tonality, derivation of accompanimental figures from the cantus firmus, alternation of homophonic and polyphonic textures, and virtuosic writing.

Perhaps these powerful works would find a larger audience if more were aware of their hidden messages. As the title suggests, each is based on a chorale rather than chant, and both tunes have a connection with Czech identity. This is the first reference in Eben's solo organ works to the Bohemian Brethren, Czech Protestants who fought authorities for religious freedom; similarly, national pride in the face of communist authoritarianism shines through his fantasia on Svatý Václav. Composed in the wake of the violent crushing of Prague's 1968 Spring, these works paid tribute to those who protested the suppression of freedom, most especially Jan Palach, the student whose self-immolation in 1969 in Wenceslas Square stands as a symbol of Czech resistance to the Soviet-backed government.

Disc 2: The Devil is in the Details – Faust for Organ

The battle between Good and Evil is at the heart of the Faustian legend and so it was fitting that Mr. Eben found this tale an apt vehicle for artistic exploration. Faust for organ was inspired by the composer's stage music composed in 1976 to accompany a production of Goethe's play at the Burgtheater in Vienna. His most obviously programmatic work, it calls upon the full resources of the organ and performer to dramatically portray Faust's temptation, downfall, and ultimate redemption.

Prolog in Heaven: The work begins with a bet between God and Satan – a competition to win Faust's soul. Heaven is evoked through bright plenum registrations, use of the upper registers, and the Introit for Palm Sunday ("All Glory, Laud and Honor"). As Mephistopheles enters, the organ descends to the lowest register with dark colors; The Great Corrupter "corrupts" the sacred theme. But God is given the last word in a section of suspended beauty in which the chant sings out, unsullied and unrestrained. The final pages feature a chordal section that, in its upward surging, symbolizes the movement toward Heaven.

Mysterium: Faust, alone in his study, summons an Evil Spirit. Bizarre colors evoke a mysterious foreboding of the danger to come. His incantation brings the Spirit to life but its evil cannot be contained. The music dances itself into a frenzy but, before it can totally possess Faust, the demon departs and Faust is left alone with a single candle lighting his miserable path.

Song of the Beggar: Is this interlude reminding us to take care of the least of humanity or is it a mocking Mephistopheles in disguise?

Easter Choirs: Faust, increasingly despondent, vows to end his life. Suddenly a choir of angels calls him back to his senses. This movement, one of the most complex in the entire collection, opens with a trumpet fanfare Eben called the "Fanfare of Life." The Latin hymn "Te Deum" is heard in combination with a "Song of Resurrection," originally sung on stage. Rising musical lines and relatively consonant writing establish the triumphant nature of these sacred songs but they become corrupted as Faust considers suicide. Sacred and secular engage in battle and the

final victory seems somewhat less than definitive – Faust has avoided marching over the cliff but he is not on spiritual terra firma.

Student Songs: A merry company of students and assorted lowlifes congregate at Auerbach's Tavern. Fanciful registrations, clusters leaping from manual to manual and glissandi suggest the unsteady movements of the drunken students as they sing the "Student Song" ("Soar up, Madame Nightingale, take greetings to my little love . . .") and the "Song of the Rats" ("There was a rat in its cellar, living only on fat and butter, it acquired a nice little belly, like that of Doctor Luther. . ."). The scene dissolves into chaotic mayhem, Mephistopheles delighting in tormenting the drunks as they stagger through their bawdy ballads.

Gretchen: The wretched sobs of the abandoned maid Gretchen have inspired musicians to compose music of exquisite sadness for centuries. Her song is cleverly divided between three keyboards, producing an effect that imitates her sobbing as she spins. This gives way to a second theme surrounded by sixteenth notes that suggest the movement of her spinning wheel. As the wheel stops the opening theme returns, now fragmented and disjunct, a mirror of Gretchen's psychological state.

Requiem: This scene of terrible cruelty takes place in the Cathedral. The Evil One taunts Gretchen, who has come to seek solace but instead finds the choir singing of the day of judgement. The composer described this movement as one of unceasing sadness – the song of one who constantly says, "I am guilty." An atmosphere of remorse and imploration is conveyed by pitch repetition; it is a death knell, or passing bell, that hints at Gretchen's tragic ending.

Walpurgis Night: The musical climax to Faust paints the scene of a witches' Sabbath. Here Faust enters "the realm of dreams and magic." With his evil guide increasingly convinced that Faust's doom is sure, the two enjoy earthly delights in this land without redemption. The music is dominated by witches' dances that are both terrifying and comical. Again, sacred theme ("Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir - Out of the depths I cry to Thee," Psalm 130) does battle with the trivial songs sung by the assorted demons and witches flying about. Evil seeks to pervert Good but, in the end, the cry to God prevails and Faust's call is heard "out of the depths."

Epilogue: As God and the Angels welcome Faust's soul to Heaven, Mephistopheles and the powers of darkness feel the fire they had intended for the Doctor. The musical and spiritual arch form is complete as Heavenly Host and the Saved proclaim: Now rejoice! The work's completed!

Versetti: The two versetti were originally organ interludes from the composer's "Missa cum populo," but, as he states in the score's preface, they can also be appreciated in concert. Both versetti are in the form of continuous variations, and closely resemble the composer's manner of improvising. The first is based on the joyful Gregorian Palm Sunday antiphon "Pueri hebraeorum." In the main it is energetic and ebullient, providing contrast with the following movement's devotional mood. Based on the communion hymn "Adoro te devote," it balances the first piece's energy with a calmer Affekt.

Disc 3: God's Reward – Job for Organ

The composer places this large-scale work in a broader context when he connects it to his earlier Faust for organ. “Faust relied on his own human strength and failed; Job humbly accepted his misfortune and triumphed. The Book of Job interested me for three reasons: firstly because of the social and theological revolution it represented in its time; until then every poor, sick or unfortunate being was regarded as forsaken and punished by God. Secondly, I was deeply impressed by the dramatic depth of this book, which gives men once and for all the key to overcome a trial of faith. Finally, I find this book extremely topical. It answers one of the most difficult questions of life asked to this day: why do good people suffer misfortunes? The book not only demonstrates the unimportance of personal sorrow in relation to world events, but it reveals God, who does not ask Job to approve his sufferings, but just to accept them, and, standing beside the unfortunate, He suffers and carries the pain with him, helping Job overcome it.”⁵

It is fascinating to note that the published score grew out of Eben's improvisations on the Job text, performances over many years that sprang from the artistic and intellectual underground movement known as Lyra Pragensis. A virtuosic work exemplifying the composer's fully mature musical language, its eight movements freeze in time not only his unique creative spark but a spiritual sincerity. Job for organ is nothing less than a proclamation of Petr Eben's faith, clothed in music that dances, cries, curses and, ultimately, praises. In honor of the work's genesis as improvised musical commentary on spoken word, Job is presented here in collaboration with actors Julie Fishell and Irwin Appel, whose dramatic and sensitive narration sets the stage for this tale of suffering, faith, and salvation.

The composer's synopsis of each movement from the published score follows:

I. **Destiny:** The movement begins Andante with a pedal reed announcement of the motif of Job's Destiny. A *piu mosso* leads to a more turbulent toccata-like middle section with the same motif spread over the entire sound spectrum of the organ before it concludes the movement.

II. **Faith:** Job humbly sings praises to God, *Tempo di corale gregoriano*, in the form of a quotation from the plainsong *Exultet* on a flute in the treble. In the ensuing *Allegro* this is repeatedly interrupted by the resounding strokes of misfortune which descend upon Job's name and family. The Job motif recurs on a trumpet, before the movement ends with a plainsong, *Gloria in Excelsis* - again in quiet persistence.

III. **Acceptance of Suffering:** Even when Satan directs his attacks against Job's fortune and person, Job remains true to his beliefs. After the initial outcry, the movement reflects Job's confidence, the peaceful strains of the chorale *Wer nur den lieben, Gott last walten* (“If thou but suffer God to guide thee”), familiar from its use by Bach, taking up the greater part of the movement.

IV. Longing for Death: The ever-increasing misfortunes overtaking Job are here reflected in a Passacaglia, the overwhelming climax of which dissolves in a final pianissimo variation in which Job is crushed to the ground.

V. Despair and Resignation: This movement is in two parts. The restless first section reflects a despairing Job's rising reproaches against God ("Wherefore dost Thou make me Thy target?"), changing to a plaintive song of submission in the second part.

VI. Mystery of Creation: The movement opens with a series of mysterious pianissimo chords contrasted with a questioning flute phrase. There follows a vivid picture of the creation as depicted by God to Job. But, after an immense climax, the movement ends quietly with a return of the opening question.

VII. Penitence and Realisation: This movement is also in two parts: the first, a song of penitence, again echoes all Job's doubts; only in the second, slow and quiet section, Job's understanding shines through in the plainsong *Veni Creator Spiritus*, on strings in dialogue with ardent flute arabesques.

VIII. God's Reward: The finale is a set of chorale-like variations on a melody by the Bohemian Brothers, *Kristus prýklad pokory* ("Christ, the model of humility"), for Christ is truly the personification of the innocent sufferer to the very end.

The presence of a Bohemian Brethren chorale links the final movement of Job with *Kleine Choralpartita über "O Jesu, all mein Leben bist Du,"* a work that mirrors the relative simplicity of *Versetti* in length and difficulty. The work's preface cites Eben's view that the theme and first three variations can be used liturgically during communion, while the more extrovert fourth and fifth variations are more appropriate for the concert hall. Whether programmed in concert or worship, this piece is an excellent entré into the world of Petr Eben's organ music. As in *Versetti*, we find Eben's trademarks such as bi-tonality, an overriding sense of lyricism, contrapuntal textures such as canon, a flair for the dramatic, and taste for rhythm, the latter of which is especially vivid in the highly decorated trumpet solo of *Mvt. 4's Risoluto*. It is clear that the composer considered this little piece a fitting vessel for his large musical personality.

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1 Fishell, Janette. *The Organ Music of Petr Eben*. Evanston: Northwestern University, 1988.

2 *ibid*

3 Landale, Susan. "The Organ Music of Petr Eben," *The American Organist*, XII (1979), 40.

4 Eben, Petr. *Petr Eben Sunday Music, Laudes*. Kamila Klugarova. Supraphon, 1990. CD.

5 Petr Eben, "Preface," *Job for organ* (London: UMP, 1989).

