

**Excerpts from program notes by Jaroslav Tůma written for his performance
in May 2017 from the 59. Festival "Smetanova Litomyšl"**

Some may be offended because of treating this national classic otherwise than with the greatest piety and seriousness, and to boot, in places even arbitrarily. As an explanation, I can say that I am just a child of the strange but also beautiful postmodern age, thus, almost everything is actually allowed. Perhaps too much of everything. But a musical performance that desires to be authentic, is obviously determined and conditioned by the spirit of the time and external influences, probably more than we are willing to admit. With all the pros and cons resulting from it.

Why does it seem to me to be a risky act today? The difficulty lies mainly in the anticipated length of the improvisations. It is supposed to be a recital performance. However, many organists claim that any improvisation lasting more than twenty minutes will always be bad. I argue that is not necessarily so. Of course, you need to have a lot of experience with yourself, and with your perseverance. It is true that practicing the organ for several or even many hours on end without a break does not cause me any trouble. But it may be difficult to focus on improvisation for that length of time— mainly psychologically. I know from my own experience that managing a 100% improvisation concert is more difficult than having a marathon of nine half-hour concerts in one day, consisting of organ literature.

Some improvisation projects are to some extent prepared beforehand. There are simply different approaches to improvisation, from a totally clean slate – figuratively speaking, through detailed elaborate annotations, sometimes even scores, through definitive formal and tonal planning, to "improvisation" written in detailed notes. Yet, it still remains a kind of improvisation (without quotation marks) if the performer makes some minor changes in the very moment of his or her performance as opposed to the prepared score. This way, almost before the final compositionally perfect version, the performance of Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart (44th Smetana's Litomyšl in 2002) sounded when Peter Eben sat at the organ. I witnessed some renditions myself. They differed from one another only in details. Petr Eben finally published his improvisations in scores as a composed cycle that we can compare with the recordings of his improvisations from the concerts. Again, the versions are almost identical.

A clean slate, on the other hand, means a situation where the improviser sits at the instrument without having any plan – not even a formal one. It is then developed only during the artistic performance.

On a broad scale between these two extremes of approaches to improvisation, I always stayed closer to the "clean slate". As a young man, I often entered international improvisation competitions, where you get the theme usually only one hour before the performance. No great preparation is then possible. Besides, I am less of a composer and more of an improviser by nature. So today I will not step over my shadow either. Thanks to this, however, this evening will be musically completely different from the the CD issued several years ago. For the rest, I

cannot do otherwise because I do not remember my earlier improvisations at all and it would be meaningless to memorise them by listening, because each organ is different and every moment is different due to the different sensibility of the audiences.

How to listen to my creations? What to do with them? They are too distant from their patterns to be perceived by the listener only as transcriptions or plain paraphrases. Their resulting shape will be due to a combination of circumstances, some of which I cannot influence. What if the organ fails? What if I feel the audience is suddenly bored? I have to create the building forms as well as select harmonic and stylistic means in a flowing musical stream in real-time. Hardly anything is given in advance, only a circle of themes, a roughly estimated length of the improvisation considered and its basic nature. Everything else stems from the possibilities of the particular organ, the acoustics of the premises and momentary inspiration. Of course, the improviser's past experience also plays a major role. I must have enough of a number of building blocks in my head, from which the improvisation can be assembled in the moment. We all know that within our tonal system we cannot bring out anything completely unheard of. However, an artistically convincing quality can arise from an unusual perspective, by adjusting the mirror, perhaps even using a twisted one.

Nowadays, improvisation is a Cinderella in the practice of what we call classical music. Most musicians and singers have long been unaccustomed to it. A pity. It is an exciting process. Organists sometimes still dare. I have been asked several times why I chose Smetana's cycle *My Country* as the starting point for my improvisation. Instead of answering I will quote from the book *The Native Lands* by Josef Čapek, which was published in 1939:

“Show me someone who has no native land; if it is a being of visible contours, then certainly he would be somehow robbed by destiny! I rather know some people who have more native lands, almost everywhere they have ever dwelt, for thus is man adaptable and always and in all capable of some attachment and growth, and of course fanaticism that everything his life ever connected him with merges with his heart.”

—Jaroslav Tůma, 10 May 2017