

The Kapralova Society Journal

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Kaprálová as a Composer of the Week: The BBC Interview

Karla Hartl



Special points of interest:

The BBC Interview

Inside this issue:

Kaprálová as a Composer of the Week / <i>Karla Hartl</i>	1-8
Venus Unwrapped	9
Composer Legends (Festival Report)	10
Women at the 74th Prague Spring Festival	11
In Review: New releases and publications / <i>Karla Hartl, Christian Heindl, Peter Herbert, Samantha Ege, Cara Search</i>	11-16

On October 12–16, 2015, BBC Radio 3 made Kaprálová their *Composer of the Week*. I was privileged to participate in the development of the script and was interviewed for the program. Not all of this material was used in the broadcast, however, and I always regretted that some interesting questions were skipped; so here is the full interview.

Where/when did you first discover Kaprálová? What grabbed you about her?

In 1997, I found her name in one of the monographs on Martinů. I was intrigued and became very curious about her music. There were no commercial releases of it available at the time so I had to do a bit of research. And then I found it – in the Brno Radio archives. I still see myself, sitting on the floor of my rented apartment in Prague, listening to a tape that was mailed to me from Brno, and remember how astonished I was by the ingeniousness and sophistication of her music, as well as impressed by the fact that it was so different from that of Martinů. Her music offers a wealth of interesting ideas, it never bores. It is bold and fresh, passionate as well as lyrical. The piano music in particular conveys all sides of her well-rounded musical personality – the energy, the passion, lyricism, the humour, the discipline as well as spontaneity.

Kaprálová was one of the very few women to conduct the BBC (Symphony) Orchestra – how did the invitation come about?

She was selected by an international jury as one of four Czech composers (namely Iša Krejčí, František Bartoš, Viktor Ullmann and Kaprálová) to represent contemporary Czech music at the 16th ISCM Festival in London. Kaprálová was the opening night attraction, conducting the excellent BBC Orchestra and apparently giving a great performance of her *Military Sinfonietta*. It must have been quite a sight for the festival audience to watch the bright young woman

conducting her rousing composition. The concert was recorded and transmitted across the ocean to the United States where it was broadcast by CBS. According to a reviewer from *Time* magazine, Kaprálová not only fared well in the international competition¹ at the festival but she became the star of the opening concert, and so “to composer Kapralova, who conducted her own lusty, sprawling composition, went the afternoon’s biggest hand.”² Among all the reviews mentioning her performance, Kaprálová would probably have cherished most that of Havergal Brian, who in his festival report for *Musical Opinion* wrote: “The first work played and broadcast at the recent festival, a *Military Sinfonietta* by Miss Vitezslava Kapralova of Czechoslovakia, proved an amazing piece of orchestral writing; it was also of logical and well balanced design.”³

Kaprálová did not speak English – how did she communicate with the BBC Orchestra?

We are fortunate to have a record of it in one of the letters Kaprálová wrote to her parents. We learn from it that Kaprálová had two rehearsals at her disposal: one was 45 minutes long, the other was even shorter – 30 minutes. The first took place at the BBC Maida Vale building, on the day before the concert, the second at Queen’s Hall on the morning before her concert on Friday, June 17. Her communication with the orchestra had to be aided by two interpreters: one was Miss Wanda Jakubíčková – a friend of Martinů from his hometown Polička who was at the time staying in Lon-

The BBC Interview

don; and the other was Hubert Foss, music editor at Oxford University Press that co-organized this edition of the ISCM Festival. Jakubíčková translated Kaprálová's instructions from Czech to English for Foss and he further interpreted it for the Orchestra. Kaprálová was by no means a passive participant in this conversation – she would sing the more problematic parts of the score to the orchestra.

But let's return to the very beginning, starting with her parents' marriage and Kaprálová's childhood.

Kaprál was one of the few of Janáček's alumni who emerged as composers.⁴ He was also an outstanding teacher who never stopped educating himself throughout his life; he perfected his skills in composition under Vítězslav Novák (who was to become in due time also the teacher of choice for his daughter) and in piano interpretation with Adolf Mikeš in Prague and Alfred Cortot in Paris (with the latter in the early 1920s). In 1911, he founded his own private music school in Brno, which grew in reputation and continued to attract generations of aspiring pianists throughout the twenties and thirties. In the 1920s, Kaprál devoted much of his time to piano performance: he and his friend Ludvík Kundera performed in concert as a two-piano team. The two were also instrumental in founding the Moravian Composers' Club in Brno in 1922, an important platform for presenting new works. In addition to his career as teacher and concert pianist, Kaprál worked as music editor and critic, as lecturer at Brno's Masaryk University (beginning in 1927), and as tenured teacher at the Brno Conservatory, where he taught composition (beginning in 1936). While today he is basically unknown outside of the Czech Republic, during his lifetime, Kaprál was one of the most respected Czech composers of his generation.

Kaprál's parents married in 1913 and she was born two years later, on January 24, 1915, in Brno, the regional capital of Moravia, which was at that time still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She was an only child growing up in a musical family: we have already mentioned Václav Kaprál, and Kaprálová's mother Viktorie was a qualified voice teacher who studied with Kristina Morfová, a soloist at the National Theatre in Prague. It was clearly the mother's influence that led to Kaprálová's lifelong passion for art song; it was also her mother who gave Kaprálová her first piano lessons at the age of 5.

Six months after Kaprálová was born, Kaprál was conscripted into the army and stationed in Albania until the end of the war. Viktorie moved with her daughter to live with grandparents in the village of Medlánky,⁵ today a suburb of Brno. Upon Kaprál's return in November 1918, the family lived in Brno-Královo Pole, in an apartment just above Kaprál's music school in Metodějova Street.⁶

Music was therefore a natural part of Kaprálová's life since

childhood. She was only nine when she started composing, and she was only twelve when she wrote her *Triste Valse*, already an accomplished piece "inspired by her father's Mazurka of 1909 and written in a generic romantic style reminiscent of Chopin."⁷

Was she later also influenced by Janáček?

One would expect that Kaprálová would not have been able to escape his influence, since she was growing up in the family of one of his students, during Janáček's lifetime and the period of the greatest successes of his music.⁸ In a way, she would not – Janáček's influence was already present in the music of her father, and his music was in turn influencing hers. She undoubtedly understood Janáček's importance and was intrigued by some of his ideas but was not tempted to follow them. We should also understand that Janáček was then perceived by his contemporaries as a highly original composer whose creative legacy was too inaccessible to be carried on. He also alienated his students with his highly unorthodox pedagogical principles and teaching methods. In comparison, the creative personality of Vítězslav Novák, who was based in Prague, seemed to be more "modern" as well as more comprehensible to his contemporaries than Janáček.⁹ It also helped that Novák was an excellent teacher and as such became a cult figure – most of Janáček's former students, including Václav Kaprál and Vilém Petrželka, Kaprálová's teacher at the Brno Conservatory, advanced their composition studies with Novák's guidance.

What can you tell us about her family life – were they comfortably off?

They were certainly not wealthy, although they achieved a reasonable standard of living. In the beginning, the only regular family income was generated through Kaprál's own private music school but his later appointments at Masaryk University and the Brno Conservatory must have enhanced the family income. In the early 1930s, with some financial help from Kaprál's brother Jan, they were able to build a summer retreat in the countryside, which also became an important source of family income, particularly for Kaprálová's mother. She rented some of its rooms to vacationers who were referred to her by family friends. I would consider them a middle class family. They could not support their daughter in all of her endeavours, however, and this is why she always seemed to be applying for bursaries, scholarships and stipends, and competed for prizes and awards.

Could you explain the "separation" of the parents and what you have found out about it through your research?

Kaprál's parents in fact did not separate, although their marriage did break down and they officially di-

vorced. However, they kept this private and continued living in the same household until WWII. It helped that Kaprál travelled a lot, and, during the thirties, Kaprálová's mother lived for most of the year in Tři Studně (their "summer" retreat was liveable all year-round), so that way they spent as little time together as possible. Kaprál had a life-long soulmate, lover and companion in Otýlie Humlová—she sang in a choir he led as choirmaster around 1920 (at the time they met, she was only 17). Yet he decided to stay with Kaprálová's mother – certainly out of concern for his daughter so that the family breakdown would not damage her future; but also for economic reasons, as Kaprál was not able to afford to maintain two households.

What was the reputation of the Brno Conservatory at the time Kaprálová was studying there?

Founded in 1919 as a successor to Janáček's organ school, the conservatory had a wide range of programs: it included an elementary music school, a 6-to-7-year program for various instruments, a senior high school (which included the double major program in composition and conducting that Kaprálová attended), a program for music teachers, and a special 5-year program for singers. Until 1928, it also made graduate studies in composition and piano interpretation possible at its own Master school. But by the time Kaprálová had studied there, the master classes were no longer offered, so if she wanted to advance her studies at a university level, she had to go to Prague and continue at the Master School associated with the Prague Conservatory.

Kaprálová enrolled at the Brno Conservatory at the age of 15. She chose the double major program in composition and conducting, the first woman in the history of this institution to do so. Out of four students (her three classmates were all male) who started the program together in 1930, she was the only one to finish it. Her teacher of composition was Vilém Petrželka (who studied, as her father had, with Janáček). She also studied harmony with Max Koblížek and Jaroslav Kvapil (who was also an alumnus of Janáček), orchestral conducting with Zdeněk Chalabala (who later became dramaturg and conductor at the National Theatre in Prague, at the invitation of Václav Talich), choral conducting with Vilém Steinman, instrumentation with Osvald Chlubna (yet another alumnus of Janáček), music history with Gracian Černušák, an esteemed Brno musicologist and music critic, aesthetics with Ludvík Kundera, and piano with Anna Holubová.

Kaprálová was a successful student, wasn't she?

Her compositions were programmed in the Conservatory recitals – an important acknowledgment in itself – and they

were always favourably received. With her graduation work, the Piano Concerto in D Minor, Kaprálová won the František Neumann Prize. Neumann was chief conductor of the Brno Opera and music director of Brno's National Theatre. Kaprálová's teacher Zdeněk Chalabala was his student.

Did she come to the notice of anyone in particular?

Yes, her music impressed quite a few people, some of whom played an important role in Brno's musical life. One of them was Gracian Černušák, an esteemed Brno musicologist who wrote many reviews of Kaprálová's music very early on; another was her teacher at the Conservatory, Ludvík Kundera. He loved to perform her music – he premiered her Piano Concerto, op. 7 and *Variations sur le Carillon*, op. 16, among other works. She was also deeply respected by Vladimír Helfert, one of the foremost Czech musicologists. He mentioned Kaprálová in his groundbreaking study on Czech modern music, published in 1936.

She graduated with the Piano Concerto, didn't she?

Yes, and it was her first orchestral composition. The solo piano part did not present any problem for Kaprálová but orchestral writing was an entirely new challenge, although she did have some experience with the orchestra as a student of conducting. In addition to consulting with her teachers at the Conservatory, she discussed the concerto's instrumentation with Theodor Schaefer, a composer friend who was known to have a great deal of expertise in this area. She could not get much advice from her father, for Kaprál had about the same experience with orchestration as she had. He was, after all, a composer of piano, chamber, and vocal music, and his entire orchestral catalogue consists of only two small-scale works: *Wedding March* and *Two Idylls*.

With the piano concerto, Kaprálová officially graduated both as composer and conductor. Her performance of the concerto's first (and longest) movement, (the full work was not programmed at the graduation concert for lack of time), more than amply demonstrated that she was able to meet the formal and technical requirements expected of a conservatory graduate. The performance took place in Brno on June 17, 1935. The soloist was Ludvík Kundera. Reviewers were duly impressed, especially with her "confidence and surety with which she controlled such a complex orchestral apparatus, as well as with her wonderful sense of orchestral color."¹⁰ It was also noted that "the work's fluent diction serves the elegant invention with such ease that the piece rises considerably above the average level of works of this kind."¹¹ Another review reads as follows: "V. Kaprálová guided the orchestra in this work, which is in all respects demanding, with admirable composure, energy, and a strong sense of purpose, and contributed with assured conducting gestures to an overall positive impression of her composition."¹² A review of the per-

The BBC Interview

formance was also published by *Prager Tagblatt*, a German language newspaper based in Prague, in which the reviewer underscored as particularly regrettable that the presenter showcased only the first movement of the work; but “even this fragment reveals a remarkable musical talent.”¹³

She received a lot of encouragement, especially from a family friend, musicologist Vladimír Helfert?

Yes, he wrote her a beautiful letter on the night of the concert. It begins with this wonderful encouragement:

Today is a day particularly significant for your entire life. You are meeting the public as a mature, accomplished artist, as well as a professional interpreter. I will be with you in my thoughts,¹⁴

and he continues,

I recall how it all began. I still have one of your childhood compositions – your waltz. I was already intrigued then by the freshness and wealth of your ideas. And so I began to watch you to see, at least from a distance, what fills your soul, how it lights up with the divine spark of music – that wonderful blessing that is given only to people as the greatest gift. And again and again I saw a new expression of your so young yet already delightful talent. And now – you are graduating! Just think about it: from a waltz to a concerto! How much life, how much of an inner, beautiful development is in it. How much your soul grew in those years, how rich it has become!

At the end of his letter he urges her:

You must always pursue the ideal of truth and artistic profundity. To be honest in your art! These are the very internal struggles, without which one cannot live a rich inner life ... to soldier on, not to give in to temptation, to be faithful to the ideals of beauty and truth. This often requires sacrifice and great courage. Without them, however, there is not great art. For this journey, I wish you, on this day, much mental strength for the rest of your life!¹⁵

We also get a tantalising glimpse of Kaprálová's personal life here, as she falls in love with a fellow pupil – what can you tell us about Ota Vach and that relationship?

Ota Vach was born in 1912, so he was 3 years older than Kaprálová. They met at the Brno Conservatory; he enrolled in the same class (composition and conducting) and studied there for the first year. He dropped out the following year but continued to study law and later also engineering. He was Kaprálová's first love – their relationship began in the late fall of 1930 and continued on and off until 1937; they then stayed in touch by correspondence until November 1939.

It was also Vach who in 1946 played an important role in bringing Kaprálová's ashes home from France. He was entrusted with the task by Kaprálová's father. Vach had to identify her remains at exhumation, which must have been both painful and gruesome. He also oversaw their cremation in Paris, and personally brought the ashes to her parents.¹⁶ He remained loyal to Kaprálová and never married. It was his rather tragic error that he did not realize how much her music meant to her. It alienated her when he failed to support her as an independent artist. And not only that: he was in fact trying to steer her toward a career in commercial music, although she detested the idea to the point that she wrote to him resolutely from France – and that letter is worth quoting:

Even if the times work against me, if everything tries to stop me, nothing will uproot me and steer me away from my path. I don't care for your 'utility ends,' they are not for me and I would not consider them, as no truly committed musician would. Such a musician is perhaps too idealistic—almost naive—but courageous.¹⁷

What can you tell us about Kaprálová's favourite country retreat?

Tři Studně is a village and municipality in Žďár nad Sázavou District, about an hour's drive northwest from Brno, not far from Martinů's hometown of Polička, in the beautiful Bohemian-Moravian Highlands. Today, the municipality has a population of 93. Kaprálová visited it in 1931 and fell in love with the place and surrounding countryside. She persuaded her parents to build a house there (it was finished in 1934) as their country retreat. She considered the place her real home. She also sketched a few of her compositions there, her string quartet among them.

Kaprál's "country retreat" is really an urban villa, resembling the functionalist style so popular in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s. The story goes that it was designed to Kaprálová's specifications. Amidst its rural surroundings, it looks rather out of place with its flat roof, large windows, and modern urban appearance. The house has an interesting history – after the war, Kaprálová's mother, in order to prevent its confiscation by the Communist state in the early 1950s, offered it to the Czech Composers Union for their recreational purposes as a sort of bequest in trust (the Union was to own the house after her death). When she died in 1973, the house became the property of the Czech Music Fund and served as a recreational facility for composers, musicians and musicologists until the early 1990s.

How much chamber music did Kaprálová write?

Three violin and piano pieces, or four in fact, if we include Kaprálová's melodrama *To Karel Čapek*, composed in memory of the beloved Czech writer who passed away on Christmas Day of 1938.¹⁸ Then there is a song for voice and quintet (fl, 2vl, vcl, pno.), a string quartet, a ritornel for cello and piano, two flute miniatures, and an unfinished reed trio. Chamber music is, perhaps, the least represented genre in Kaprálová's catalogue, but the works are strong, especially the string quartet and ritornel. Kaprálová's choice of mediums is well balanced overall, perhaps with some bias towards song, Kaprálová's most beloved genre.

Chamber music was actively supported by composers' clubs and contemporary music societies that operated in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period. In Prague, it was namely Přítomnost (The Present) and Umělecká beseda (Artistic Forum) that organized many chamber music concerts. Among these, particularly well known was Silvester Hippmann's concert series called "Tuesdays" (as the concerts took place on every Tuesday), in which Kaprálová regularly participated. As it was much easier for the composers to secure performances of chamber music rather than orchestral works, the genre must have been very popular. Nevertheless, Czech critics and music historians, and perhaps the general public too, have always tended to assign higher value to orchestral works, so that is what Kaprálová focused on, to prove herself a serious composer who could write in the larger forms.

In your research, did you come across quite a few unfinished projects?

Yes, I did. One of them is a trio for oboe, clarinet, and bassoon, on which Kaprálová worked for about two months, from December 18, 1937 to February 1938. The idea to write a piece for reed trio came from Martinů, who was working at about the same time (in December 1937) on his *Four Madrigals* for reed instruments. He dedicated it to Trio d'anches de Paris. Kaprálová and Martinů planned to have their trios performed side by side at one of Triton's concerts.¹⁹ Martinů originally wanted to offer both their compositions to Universal Edition in Vienna (in the end, his trio was published by Eschig instead), but while Martinů finished his work, Kaprálová only completed most of the first movement of her trio.

Do you know why it wasn't finished?

While she seemed to have been happy with its musical ideas, she found writing for reed trio quite a task; she thought she needed more experience writing for those instruments and eventually abandoned the project.

Why was it felt significant enough to warrant the reconstruction? What does the reconstruction add to our knowledge about Kaprálová?

It is a clever, witty composition, revealing Kaprálová's playful side, and apparently "in a very Parisian style of the period," according to Stéphane Egeling, who reconstructed it.²⁰ Stéphane is the first oboist of Sinfonieorchester Aachen and a musicologist who is particularly interested in the reed trio repertoire. It is owing to him that we can enjoy this work in some form, and he is confident that the trio will eventually become part of the reed trio repertoire.

You have also discovered a previously unknown composition written by Kaprálová – Sad Evening – is that correct?

Yes. I found it in 2006 at the Moravian Museum, guided by a mention of it in an old card catalogue. It had been overlooked until then because the song had not been mentioned by any of Kaprálová's biographers²¹ and we don't find it mentioned in Kaprálová's diaries, correspondence or lists of Kaprálová's works. We were unable to identify the author of the text; but based on my knowledge of Kaprálová's own poetry, I am inclined to believe that she set the song to her own text. It also seems feasible that Kaprálová planned it to be a part of a collection of orchestral songs.²² This collection (but not the individual songs) is mentioned in a list of works attached to a CV written by Kaprálová at the request of Alois Hába, chair of the Czechoslovak section of ISCM, for the 1938 ISCM Festival brochure. It is clear that the collection was one of the projects Kaprálová later abandoned, since it is never mentioned again in her correspondence or in any of the lists of works that followed.

Another of her works, Variations sur le Carillon, was much admired by Martinů?

Yes, indeed. When the work was published in Paris in late November of 1938, he announced it to Kaprálová with great pleasure in the form of a rhymed letter. Each variation received a witty commentary from Martinů, especially the final coda:

[O]ne must have strong hands for the end of this masterpiece and the Andante maestoso must be *fffortissimo* [!] and that is what's beautiful about it; let's sacrifice the piano, let's go and cut the piano to small pieces, it must have the breadth as if all the bells of Paris were ringing, as if something were happening and the earth were shaking; and thus let's get to it, let's not restrain ourselves, it is short, just two lines, and in that passionate playing it is disappearing into the distance; and just at the moment you became really excited, the *poco ritardando* orders you not to rush so

The BBC Interview

much but bring it slowly to the end, and it will retreat more and more into the distance and then the main theme comes back and after that is *subito* and that's it, although there is still a *semplice*, and I regret it so much because in that distance it was so beautiful but we have now already arrived at the cover of the score.²³

Interestingly, although the title refers to a carillon of St.-Etienne, the bells were actually rung in the adjacent tower that used to be a part of the no-longer-standing Ste-Geneviève church.

Martinů was clearly conflicted over his affair with VK. Still married, he appears to have been unable to leave his wife?

When Kaprálová arrived in Paris in 1937, Martinů had been married to Charlotte Quennehen for about seven years. She was a good woman, loving, and immensely loyal to Martinů. But Kaprálová brought passion to his life – she was full of life, charismatic, intelligent, incredibly talented and passionate about music. They would spend hours discussing and arguing over the tenets of composition. Furthermore, she was his compatriot – someone who could grasp and relate immediately to all cultural references in their conversation. And, with the war imminent and their homeland in danger, they had yet another deep connection, one that Charlotte could not compete with at all. Of course, Martinů was conflicted over the matter, but so was Kaprálová. After all, her childhood had been affected by the breakdown of her parents' marriage, and she was never able to accept fully her father's love for Otýlie Humlová. And so it was in fact Kaprálová who tried to break up with Martinů – first in the fall of 1938 and then a year later, in the fall of 1939; this second time successfully, due to her relationship with Jiří Mucha.

Can you give us more details of the breakup of Kaprálová's relationship with Martinů?

When Martinů visited Kaprálová in Tři Studně in the summer of 1938, her parents grew concerned as they realized the true nature of their daughter's relationship with her mentor. They were unhappy about it. During the fall, Martinů did all he could to bring Kaprálová back to Paris on scholarship – he even made her a sort of marriage proposal in one of his letters, and hinted at wanting to have a family with her, since he knew that having children was important to her. By that time Kaprálová was consciously distancing herself from Martinů, however, and just around Christmas 1938, she wrote to him that she had decided to become engaged to a young engineer whom she had met during his stay in Paris and whom she was now dating in Prague. Martinů urged her not to make any rush decisions until she saw him. But Kaprálová was becoming conflicted about her return to Paris as well, and postponed her departure, although she had already received her stipend. She did leave eventually, in January 1939. In Paris she found a bitter, resentful Martinů.

What brought them together again, and this time more strongly than ever, was the German invasion of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939. During that difficult time they found solace in each other. Eventually, they started to plan their future together, and Kaprálová broke the news in June of 1939 to her parents.

When Kaprálová told her parents that she and Martinů were making plans to live together, do we know what they thought about it?

Yes, we do. They objected to it, especially Kaprál, and Kaprálová valued her father's opinion immensely. In one of her letters, dated June 14, 1939, she tried to appeal to him:

You know too well, Daddy, how it feels to live with someone only because of family responsibilities and social conventions, even if the other person is as good as Mom or Kopec (her fiancé). Kopec – a good husband, children, a household. Martinů – love and true understanding. Age difference never bothered me. ... And should Martinů become naturalized, I would be able to move freely across the border, to visit the two of you. Yet these are such problems that my head is spinning; it is all about the two of you, how much happiness I would bring you with that decision.²⁴

What do you see as the reasons behind the breakup?

Consideration for parents was the most important one. Other reasons? For Kaprálová, having children was very important, and she must have sensed that Martinů was not really interested in parenting. Their age difference, which was one of the concerns of her parents, did not seem to bother her much – she tended to date men who were older, sometimes much older, than herself. Did she perhaps also worry about her independence as a composer, about Martinů's influence being too strong? I doubt it, because, except for two or three works, one cannot find much evidence of his influence in her music. I believe that she was strong and independent enough to be able to learn from her mentor without being overpowered by his music. But this is all speculative, as we don't know enough about their relationship.

Soon after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, she began to compose her op. 21, Concertino for Violin, Clarinet and Orchestra?

Yes, the Concertino was primarily her response to the occupation of Czechoslovakia, although it also echoes some of the turmoil that she went through in her rela-

tionship with Martinů. She quotes his “Julietta motive”, their calling card, in the first two movements. Kaprálová began writing the concertino on March 18, 1939, and she sketched the first two movements and started the third one during the months of March and April. She wanted to finish it and orchestrate it at Augerville de la Rivière, where she stayed during July and August 1939 at the castle as a guest of the owner. This was arranged for her and several other Czech students by the wife of the Czech Ambassador Stefan Osuský. But she was unable to focus on the piece there, and later she could not find time to finish it.

Do you know why she did not finish it?

The German occupation of Czechoslovakia changed Kaprálová's life almost overnight. Since her return home was now out of question, she faced the arduous task of earning her own living; she no longer received her stipend nor financial aid from home, as financial transactions were subjected to new, strict rules. In the fall of 1939, having no regular income, Kaprálová joined the household of her artist friends who found themselves in a similar position and decided to pool their resources to get through hard times (one of these friends was her future husband Jiří Mucha). As a result, she spent much of her precious time on small commissions in an effort to support herself. She even complained to her parents in one of her letters that she could not get back to her “own” music because she was busy composing occasional compositions, all commissions. One of those that she did like was the lively *Prélude de Noël*, an orchestral miniature which Kaprálová composed for a Christmas program of the Paris PTT Radio. The piece was featured in a broadcast to occupied Czechoslovakia.

Let's not also forget that this was the time when Paris started preparing for war. Kaprálová joined the efforts of the Czech community in Paris that organized activities for and around the newly formed Czechoslovak Army. Soon she became heavily involved: from founding a choir and writing reviews for the Czech exile weekly *La Cause Tchécoslovaque* to composing music for the radio, stage (for a Czech theatre group, a commission on which she collaborated with Martinů) and even for the screen, reportedly for films co-scripted or acted in by Hugo Haas.²⁵ But it is not known if the music was ever finished or used. In the last months of her life, Kaprálová also resumed her studies at the Ecole normale (she was receiving her stipend again), adding to her already busy schedule.

And Martinů during this period – what was happening there?

They grew closer again after the March 15 invasion, as I have already mentioned, seeking solace in their relationship; yet they parted during the summer: Kaprálová stayed alone in Augerville de la Rivière and Martinů at Vieux Moulin where he had a small house that his wife had inherited. Kaprálová was always on Martinů's mind, however, and during that summer

he composed his deeply personal work that is clearly connected to her: the *Czech Madrigals* for mixed voices, based on Czech folk poetry. He intentionally selected the poems to make references to their relationship.

Can you say at what point Kaprálová started to contemplate marriage to Mucha? And why?

In the early months of 1940. And why? I suspect that it must have been a pragmatic decision at first. Let's not forget the times Kaprálová lived in (these were the initial years of the war) and what her situation was – at this point, she was in exile, she was a refugee, without means, and a young woman in need of protection from the spoils of war. Mucha was undoubtedly in love with her, and as Alphonse Mucha's son, he was well connected. In addition, he was fluent in several languages (a skill that Kaprálová admired greatly, as she barely got by with her German and French), and was resourceful, self-confident, and good-looking. She really liked him and grew dependent on him. She was, after all, all alone, without parents, for the first time entirely on her own. Yet she was conflicted about the wedding, and, according to one of her friends who witnessed it, she cried the night before, still unsure if she was making the right decision.²⁶ Her friends kept assuring her that she was, that she could not stay on her own in war-torn Europe. Yet, according to Martinů's biographer Šafránek, she spent the morning before her wedding with – Martinů. And a few months later, when she was dying in a little storage room that was vacated for her at Montpellier's university hospital, her last thoughts were with Martinů, if we are to believe the testimony of Jiří Mucha. He wrote in his novel-autobiography *Podivné lásky* (Peculiar Loves) that her last words were “To je Julietta” (it's Julietta), Martinů's opera.²⁷

Can you describe Kaprálová's personality, what did she look like? Was she popular?

She was very petite, not even 160 cm in height, but did not look fragile. In fact, she was quite muscular, for she loved recreational sports: swimming and playing volleyball in summer, cross-country skiing and ice skating in winter. She had voluminous, naturally curly, dark brown hair with chestnut brown highlights, dark, steel blue eyes,²⁸ and a pleasant face with good bone structure. As to her personality – she was allegedly very charismatic. Kaprálová seemed to be able to attract people and make a lasting impression on them. She was full of life, energetic, smart, spontaneous, passionate, and compassionate. She had a melancholy side to her as well but was never depressed for very long. She was a strong, naturally confident person, an organizer, a born leader, ambitious and extremely hardworking.

The BBC Interview

When an artist dies young there's always the question about what might have been – what didn't she have time to turn her attention to and finish, for example?

The reed trio, the last movement of Concertino, op. 21, the second of the Two Ritornels, op. 25, the second of Two Dances for Piano, op. 23. We do know at least what they may have sounded like. But one work in particular remains a complete enigma: Kaprálová's opus 24 which has never been found.

And what about her relationship with Martinů – has that got in the way of her being considered as a composer in her own right?

Not really, although some people may still see her as living in his shadow. But that is no longer true. Not after her music has been made available and almost all of it published, recorded, and programmed in numerous concerts over the past two decades. In fact, we have to be grateful for that love story of Kaprálová and Martinů. Without it, her name might well have been forgotten by now. Anyone who loves Martinů's music and reads about him will encounter her name, will become intrigued by her and will look for her music, as I once did. In light of Martinů's deep respect for Kaprálová's music, I know that he would have been pleased that he could be helpful to her once more. He believed in her talent, and always, and very generously, supported her music. And now it is finally out there.

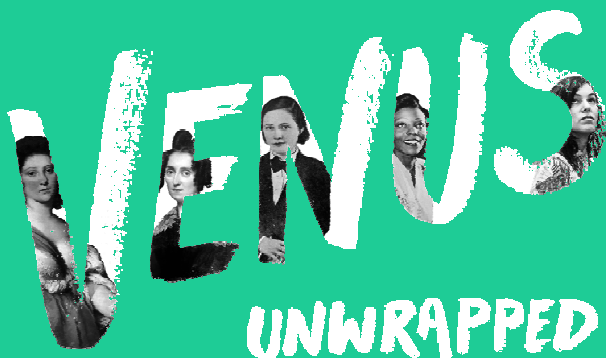
Notes

- ¹ The opening concert night also included Josef Koffler's Symphony No. 3, conducted by Hermann Scherchen, Lennox Berkeley's *Domini est Terra*, conducted by Arnold Fulton, Anton Webern's *Das Augenlicht*, conducted by Scherchen, Manuel Rosenthal's symphonic suite *Jeanne D'Arc*, conducted by the composer, Julian Bautista's *Tres Ciudades*, conducted by Scherchen, and Igor Markewitch's *Le Nouvel Age*, conducted by the composer.
- ² "International Egg Rolling." *Time* magazine, June 27, 1938, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,759885,00.html>
- ³ Havergal Brian, "The Nature of Modern Music. Contemporary Music Festival," *Musical Opinion* (July 1938): 858.
- ⁴ The other composers were Kvapil, Chlubna, Petrželka, Haas and Harašta.
- ⁵ The address was: Medlánky č. 61
- ⁶ The address was Metodějova ulice č. 6—the building was destroyed in 2014 to make room for new construction.
- ⁷ Erik Entwistle, "Kaprállová's Piano Works." In *The Kaprálová Companion*, ed. Karla Hartl and Erik Entwistle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 28.
- ⁸ Jindřiška Bártová, "Kaprállová in the Context of Czech Music." In *The Kaprálová Companion*, ed. Karla Hartl and Erik

Entwistle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 15.

- ⁹ Ibid., 16.
- ¹⁰ From a review by Gracian Černušák for *Lidové noviny*, 20 June 1935, p. 9.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² From a review signed by initials –mf–, *Moravské noviny*, 19 June 1935, p. 4.
- ¹³ From a review signed by initials W.H. (Walter Hasenclever), *Prager Tagblatt*, 20 June 1935, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ Vladimír Helfert to Vítězslava Kaprálová, 17. 6. 1935.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. English translation Lida Hatrick.
- ¹⁶ When Kaprálová's remains were reinterred officially in the Brno Cemetary Honorary Site in 1949, Vach was asked by Kaprálová's mother to carry the box that contained them. It must have been a bit awkward, as Kaprálová's former husband Jiří Mucha was also at the Brno funeral but by that time he had already remarried (to Scottish composer Geraldine Thomsen).
- ¹⁷ Lenka Vojtíšková Papers, Czech Museum of Music.
- ¹⁸ Karel Čapek (1890–1938) is considered the most important author of twentieth century Czech literature. His books have been translated into many languages, and his pre-war futuristic novels are often compared to those of H.G. Wells.
- ¹⁹ Triton was a French society for contemporary music, founded by Pierre-Octave Ferroud in Paris in 1932. It was active until 1939.
- ²⁰ Mentioned to Karla Hartl before the premiere of the trio (performed by Trio Lézar) in Děčín, Czech Republic, on June 22, 2011.
- ²¹ Přemysl Pražák, ed. *Vítězslava Kaprálová. Studie a vzpomínky* (Praha: HMUB, 1949); Jiří Macek, *Vítězslava Kaprálová* (Praha: Svaz čs. Skladatelů, 1958).
- ²² Besides *Smutný večer*, the collection could have included Kaprálová's *Sbohem a šáteček* (Waving farewell) and possibly a version of *Navždy* (Forever) for voiceband and orchestra (which is unfinished and completely different from the well-known version for voice and piano).
- ²³ Erik Entwistle, *The Kaprálová Companion*, 64.
- ²⁴ Also quoted in *The Kaprálová Companion*, 149–150n73.
- ²⁵ Hugo Haas was a Czech movie star who managed to escape to France from occupied Czechoslovakia. He was a brother of Czech Jewish composer Pavel Haas who, unlike him, was unable to leave Czechoslovakia and later died in Auschwitz.
- ²⁶ Author's interview with Maria Bauer, née von Kahler, on January 18, 2014.
- ²⁷ *Juliette* is the name of Martinů's surrealist opera. The so called Juliette motive, three descending notes used abundantly in the opera, were quoted in many works by both Martinů and Kaprálová.
- ²⁸ *The Kaprálová Companion*, 140n1.

Unless stated otherwise, English translations are by Karla Hartl.



VENUS

UNWRAPPED

A new light on music by women

In 2019 Kings Place's award-winning flagship series focuses on the creative firepower of women composers: *Venus Unwrapped*. Across twelve months and more than sixty events, we unlock the secret history of music by women, a shadow canon that begins with the music of medieval nuns, moves on to gifted professionals working in the European courts, the stifling world of the 19th-century drawing room, radical voices of the 20th century and into an explosion of creativity from female artists today in all genres. *Venus Unwrapped* embraces more than one hundred composers from Anna Meredith to Florence Price, Rafaella Alleotti to Rebecca Clarke, Barbara Strozzi to Sona Jobarteh, Fanny Mendelssohn to Pan Daijing, Kaija Saariaho to Nikki Yeoh, Cara Dillon to Cate Le Bon. From classical to electronica, jazz to folk, contemporary to comedy, *Venus Unwrapped* aims to reclaim her-story in music and inspire the next generation.

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"In fifteen years of learning the piano and cello and singing in choirs, I never once played a piece written by a woman. Thirty years on, bringing up my own children, how much has really changed? In all the years they have been learning instruments or singing in choirs, no female-composed music has ever sat on the music stand either. Music of richness and variety by Marie Bigot, Fanny Hensel, Amy Beach, Bessie Smith, Leokadiya Kashperova, Vítězlava Kaprálová, Grażyna Bacewicz, Sofia Gubaidulina, Meredith Monk, Unsuk Chin... all could have been taught, but haven't been. An all-male canon is lazily perpetuated down the generations. Two major books published this year (Robert Philips' *The Classical Music Lover's Companion* and Anthony Tommasini's *The Indispensable Composers*) contain no mention at all of music by women.

[T]oo many of the stories of women composers are tragic: the exceptionally gifted Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn were both discouraged from developing their composing talent; Rebecca Clarke wrote powerful music for her instrument, the viola, but gave up after her one 'whiff of success'. She was doubted and she doubted herself. The extraordinary Lili Boulanger died at twenty-four having written her masterpiece Psalm 33, while Vítězlava Kaprálová, whose fiery, explosive music reveals a major talent, died at twenty-five. The idea that all women composers wrote pale, weak, derivative music couldn't have persisted so long if works by Boulanger, Kaprálová, Kashperova, Gubaidulina, Galina Ustvolskaya and Elizabeth Maconchy had been regularly performed. But I well remember, as a young woman working in the world of classical music critics, encountering the dismissive sneer, the sigh, the shaking of the head when a woman composer's name was mentioned." *Helen Wallace*

Helen Wallace is Programme Director at Kings Place and curator of *Venus Unwrapped*. These quotes are from her guest post for <http://www.knowledgequarter.london/guest-post-venus-unwrapped/>

Reports



**12. II. 2018
18:00**

SLEZSKOOSTRAVSKÁ
RADNICE, OBŘADNÍ SÍN,
SLEZSKÁ OSTRAVA

Výjimečná žena VÍTĚZSLAVA KAPRALOVÁ

(CZE, POL, RUS, SVK)

SKLADATELSKÉ LEGENDY/ Hudební vzpomínka na výraznou skladatelskou osobnost 20. století – Vítězslavu Kaprálovou. V pestrém programu se představí prvotřídní sólisté i komorní tělesa z Česka, Polska, Ruska a Slovenska za účasti The Kapralova Society z Kanady.



The 2nd International Slavic Music Festival took place on November 5–15, 2018 in Ostrava, Czech Republic. The festival is programmed in collaboration with Ostrava University's faculties of arts and education, the Art School of Ostrava-Poruba, and the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice. This year, the group was also joined by the Terežín Memorial as a new programming partner. Czech Radio (Ostrava) was the main media partner present on site to record not only the young performer competition, which is becoming a staple event of this annual festival, but also several other concerts.

The festival patrons had a chance to explore a very broad vocal repertoire this year, (shaped by the festival's artistic director Martin Kajzar, himself a performing singer), ranging from folk music, medieval and Russian Orthodox Church chants and Polish choral works to a children's opera *Brundibár* by "Terežín composer" Hans Krása. The inaugural programming feature in 2018, the "Composer Legends", which was dedicated to Vítězslava Kaprálová, enriched this primarily vocal festival with some first rate chamber music and solo piano works.

The *Composer Legends* concert took place on November 12 in the beautiful Ceremonial Room of the Silesian Ostrava Town Hall. The program offered an overview of all stages of Kaprálová's creative development as composer. *Legend* and *Burlesque* and the virtuosic So-

nata *Appassionata* were presented as examples of her "Brno" period, while the *April Preludes* and the songs *Forever* and *Waving Farewell* represented her "Prague" period. Kaprálová's creative time in Paris was illustrated by her unfinished reed trio (completed by Stéphane Egeling in 2011), *Elegy* for violin and piano, *Tales of a Small Flute*, and her last opus, *Ritournelle pour violoncelle et piano*. The wonderfully diverse program, which allowed for a variety of instruments and their combination (solo piano, violin and piano, cello and piano, flute and piano, reed trio, and voice and piano), received sensitive performances from a truly international cast of musicians: Anna Chruściel, Karol Goryl and Barbara Kamińska from Poland, Alexander Starý, Dušan Brus, Michal Bárta, Kateřina Pašková, Ladislav Mariaš and Alice Štěpánková from the Czech Republic, Alexey Aslamas and Anton Aslamas from Russia, and Patrícia Janečková from Slovakia. The reed trio (Kamińska, Goryl, Pašková) is rarely programmed, so its performance was the evening's highlight for me personally. The only disappointment was attendance at less than half capacity for the venue, but the small audience was truly supportive and appreciative. As the concert was recorded for a later broadcast by Czech Radio 3, I remain optimistic that this thoughtful program will receive both an extended life and well deserved attention.

Karla Hartl



Artists from left to right: Dušan Brus, Kateřina Pašková, Alice Štěpánková, Anna Chruściel, Karol Goryl, Barbara Kamińska, Anton Aslamas, Alexey Aslamas, Ladislav Mariaš, Patrícia Janečková, and Alexandr Starý. Photo: Tereza Blažková.

Women at the 74th International Prague Spring Festival May 12–June 4, 2019

The International Prague Spring Festival is the oldest and largest festival in the Czech Republic. Since its inception in 1946 in former Czechoslovakia, the participation of women composers and conductors has been either non-existent or extremely low. The 2019 figures seem to vary little from this long-term trend.

Composers: 3/84 (4%)

Living composers: 3/16 (19%)

Conductors/Artistic Directors/
Choirmasters: 2/24 (8%)

Women composers participating in this year's festival include Jessie Montgomery, Cecile McLorin Salvant (jazz), and Jana Vřoršová.

Women conductors/Artistic Directors include Alondra de la Parra and Blanka Korneťová.

Of the three women composers, Grammy winner Salvant will receive the most substantial time at the festival (her own program). Jessie Montgomery's piece is part of an evening program and is 14 minutes long. Vřoršová's chamber work was commissioned by the festival and its length is unknown. The fact that she was successful in the commissioning process, however, is in itself encouraging news.

Source: The 2019 festival program brochure. Figures compiled by Karla Hartl.



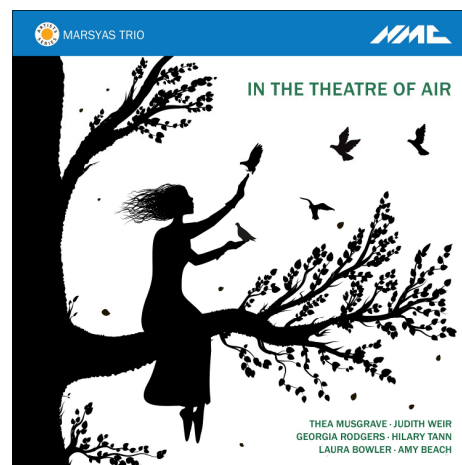
Suite en miniature, op. 1 (recorded in 1974), *Variations sur le Carillon de l'église St-Étienne-du-Mont*, op. 16, (recorded in 2008), *April Preludes*, op. 13 (recorded in 1969), *Legend and Burlesque*, op. 3 (recorded in 2013), and *Elegy* (recorded in 2013). Pilsen Radio Orchestra with Josef Blacký, Jarmila Kozderková, Božena Pidermannová, Ondřej Lébr, Martin Kasík. Radioservis (2018).

The charming miniature suite for small orchestra, *Suite en miniature*, op. 1, came into being in autumn 1935 at the master school of the Prague Conservatory. Its ideas are much older, however; the composition is based on the musical material of Kaprálová's piano suite from 1931, still rooted in Slavic romanticism combined with French impressionist elements. That would explain both the music and the opus number, because chronologically the work neighbours in the composer's catalog *Three Piano Pieces*, op. 9. The seriousness of purpose and emotional maturity as well as increased pianistic demands of the original piano suite, which Kaprálová composed when she was merely sixteen years old, set it apart from her earlier juvenilia. Its colorful harmonic language at times evokes an almost orchestral sound; Kaprálová must have been aware of this quality when she later decided to orchestrate it. First, however, she utilized it in another composition: a year later, she added to its original four movements (Maestoso, Cantabile–moderato, Andante con moto and Tempo di menuetto) a fifth movement, Tempo di marcia funebre, and under the title *Five Piano Compositions* had it performed in April 1932 in a recital at the Brno Conservatory. Despite the close connection with

New releases

the *Five Piano Compositions* however, the *Suite en miniature* can be considered as a separate work, for it differs from *Five Compositions* not only in scoring, the number of movements and their titles (Praeludium, Pastorale, Lullaby and Menuetto), but, to some extent, also in musical material. Its instrumentation is interesting as well. The dark Praeludium, with its mystical, almost tragic atmosphere, is scored for strings and the contrasting lyrical Pastorale for wind instruments; the gently melancholic Lullaby is scored for a small orchestra to which Kaprálová added a trumpet, timpani, triangle and cymbals in the final Menuetto, ending the composition in a lightened mood. She dedicated the *Suite en miniature* to the Brno Radiojournal Ensemble that gave it its premiere (under the baton of Theodor Schaefer) on Brno Radio on February 7, 1936.

Karla Hartl



In the Theatre of Air is a new release by NMC Recordings, an award-winning British label that specializes in contemporary classical music. The release is marking the centenary of the *Representation of the People Act 1918* in the UK, which enabled some women over the age of 30 to vote. The project features work by Thea Musgrave, Judith Weir, Georgia Rodgers, Hilary Tann, Laura Bowler and Amy Beach, performed by the Marsyas Trio (flute, cello, piano). The London-based trio was formed in 2009 by graduates of the Royal Academy of Music. Aiming to inspire a generation of new works for this genre, they are uncovering lesser-known repertoire and are proactive in commissioning new music.

In Review



Don't look away just because the composer's name is unfamiliar and has too many syllables. Kaprálová (1915–1940) is a vital link in Czech music, her death at 25 the closure of a century of genius. This comprehensive account of her piano music gives strong hints of where she was heading. A sonata appassionata of 1933 takes percussive elements from Bartók and its elliptical narrative lines from Janáček; the voice is powerful but not yet formed. Her piano masterpiece dates from 1937 and is dedicated to the pianist Rudolf Firkušný, who had introduced her to Martinů. *Dubnová preludia* (April preludes) calls to mind the Slavonic fixation with climate, from Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* to Janáček's *In the Mists*, with a touch of April in Paris. Kaprálová's expression is uniquely her own, inflected with hints of Debussy and Berg but original, vivacious and captivating. Just nine minutes long, it gives the strongest possible indication of her untapped potential. With Kaprálová's tragic death and her country's totalitarian subjugation, Czech music went flat for a very long time. Giorgio Koukl's chronicle of her life at the piano provides compelling listening.

From a review by Norman Lebrecht for *La scena musicale*.

Vif, plein de fantaisie, le jeu de Koukl (serveur patente de la musique de Martinů) met en valeur toute la singularité de la *Passacaille grotesque*, des *Pièces* op. 9, des *Deux bouquets de fleurs* de 1935 et d'autres miniatures (*Ostinato Fox*, *Fanfare festive*). On découvre aussi, grâce à lui, deux pages majeures regorgeant d'énergie juvénile, d'idées fraîches et hardies : les quatre beaux *Préludes d'avril* op.13 (1937) et les *Variations sur le carillon de l'église Saint-Etienne-du-Mont* op.16 (1938), parfaite illustration du vocabulaire musical assez recherché de la jeune Tchéque, avec ses harmonies extrêmement originale.

From a review by Patrick Szersnovicz for *Diapason*.
(*Diapason d'or* for the month of May 2017.)

EntArteOpera Festival: Violin Concerto and Double Concertos. Gramola 2 CD 99098. Ethel Smyth: *Concerto for Violin, Horn and Orchestra*; Vítězslava Kaprálová: *Concerto for Violin, Clarinet and Orchestra*; Karl Amadeus Hartmann: *Concerto 'Funebre' for Violin and Strings*; Bohuslav Martinů: *Concerto for Violin, Piano and Orchestra*. Thomas Albertus Irnberger, violin, Reinhard Wieser, clarinet, Milena Viotti, horn, Wiener Concert-Verein, Doron Salomon, conductor; Michael Korstick, piano, Israel Chamber Orchestra, Georgisches Kammerorchester Ingolstadt, Martin Sieghart, conductor.

In Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940) we encounter a personality whose development was brought to an abrupt end by her early death so that we can only speculate about the important role she might have played in the music of the 20th century. For a long time barely noticed, in recent years a strong interest has developed in her work, most of which, fortunately, has appeared in good editions and has, in part, already been released on CD. In all these efforts the Canadian Kapralova Society, which was founded in 1998 and is devoted to the composer's creative work, has played a major role. A particularly interesting aspect of Kaprálová's varied oeuvre is that it was not influenced primarily by French musical life or by her contemporaries in that country. Instead she remained focused on a tonally-centred expressionism, and in this regard is related to those of her immediate Czech and Austrian countrymen who did not employ the twelve-tone system, for example Korngold, Schreker, Zemlinsky or Kornauth. The *Concertino for Violin, Clarinet and Orchestra*, op. 21 (1939) is without doubt one of her most advanced works in which she takes a highly personal path among the very different stylistic tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s.

Christian Heindl



Vítězslava Kaprálová: Concertino for Violin, Clarinet and Orchestra, Op. 21. Thomas Irnberger (violin); Reinhard Wieser (clarinet); Wiener Concert-Verein; Doron Salomon (conductor). Gramola CD 99098 (2018). (Double CD coupled with Ethel Smyth's *Concerto for Violin, Horn and Orchestra*, Karl Amadeus Hartman's *Concerto funebre* [Israel Chamber Orchestra/Sieghart] and Martinů's *Concerto for Violin, Piano and Orchestra H 342* [Korstick (piano)/Georgisches Kammerorchester Ingolstat/Sieghart])

A very mixed bag of performers is presented on a thoroughly entertaining and worthwhile album. Both CDs present contrasting works of great character and it has been a true pleasure to hear all the music.

Given the quality of Ethel Smyth's music, it is surprising that more has not been recorded or performed, though a welcome renewal of interest in her music is indicated by this recording, which is both powerful and enchanting at the same time.

The Hartman work is not something to listen to if one wants to be cheered up! It is, rather, a deeply tragic work, written in response to the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. At the same time, however, it is a totally lyrical work of great depth and power, here given a very fine performance indeed.

Martinů's H 342 *Concerto* is a very special work, longer in duration than most of his many concertos but in a good performance it never outstays its welcome: this one is a little ponderous. I was not totally convinced by Martin Sieghart's grasp of the composer's idiom and the flow of the music is thereby uncertain at times. Thomas Irnberger, though, is reasonably in command of his part and is well supported by Michael Korstick on piano. While the performances improve after the first movement, there are superior versions on Supraphon and Pentatone.

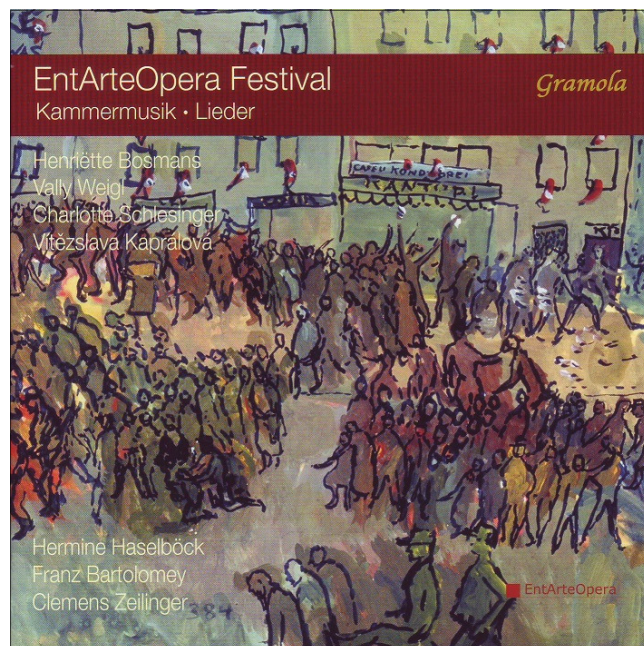
The real gem of this album is Kaprálová's *Concertino*. This work is one of the most enchanting and captivating in her output. The music dances, flows easily – even capriciously – but always totally convincingly. All of the performers are clearly enamoured of the work and give it everything they've got. The first movement is the only one with a tempo marking but it seems that the performers have judged the work to perfection. The excitement of the two outer movements are in fine contrast to the exquisite beauties of the central, slow movement.

The *Concertino*'s orchestration and the last movement were never completed by the composer, and Miloš Štědroň and Leoš Faltus came to its rescue, editing for publication. They let the unfinished third movement simply fade away. No matter; let it be said that this is a performance easily up to and even beyond the standard set by the only other recording available, a Czech Radio double CD of much importance with Pavel Wallinger on violin, Lukáš Daňhel on clarinet and the Brno Philharmonic conducted by Olga Machoňová Pavlů.

Kaprálová's *Concertino* stands as one of her most original and fascinating compositions. We cannot know where her composing career would have headed but this work stands as a signpost, a milestone on the trajectory of her music. She remains an outstanding figure of her generation and this work, really quite unlike anything from the others around her, marks her as one of the greatest of the lost geniuses of the time.

Quibbles about the first movement of the Martinů concerto aside, this is an immensely rewarding album and can be most warmly recommended.

Peter Herbert



EntArteOpera Festival: Chamber Music and Songs. Henriëtte Bosmans, Vally Weigl, Charlotte Schlesinger, Vítězslava Kaprálová, Bohuslav Martinů / Hermine Haselböck (mezzosoprano), Franz Bartolomey (violoncello), Clemens Zeilenger (piano). Gramola CD 99183 (2018).

Let's state right at the beginning that this is a rare collection dedicated to little known repertoire. A joint project of EntArteOpera Festival and Gramola, the disc features art songs and chamber music of four European women composers: Austrian composer Vally Weigl (1894–1982), Dutch composer Henriëtte Bosmans (1895–1952), German composer Charlotte Schlesinger (1909–1976) and Czech composer Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940). Bosmans was the only one of them who survived the rise of National Socialism and the war years in her homeland. Weigl and Schlesinger were both forced to emigrate and spent the remainder of their lives in the United States, while Kaprálová died early on, on the verge of the Second World War, in exile in France.

The recording's primary focus is on the featured composers' art songs but the selection for Weigl, Bosmans and Kaprálová also includes an additional chamber piece: Weigl is represented by an impressionistic piano toccatina, Bosmans by her early, romantic sonata for cello and piano, and Kaprálová by her neoclassical ritornel for cello and piano. The disc also includes, almost as an afterthought, Kaprálová's and Martinů's German language version of *Love Carol* (Liebesliedchen) in a world premiere CD recording. Haselböck, Zeilenger, and Bartolomey give the works excellent performances. Enthusiastically recommended for Bartolomey's wonderful rendition of Kaprálová's ritornel alone!

Karla Hartl

In Review

Four Women brings together five twentieth-century piano works by four significant female composers. Pianist Samantha Ege journeys through a diverse range of styles and influences—from African American folk songs and classical forms in Florence Price's Sonata in E Minor to modernist explorations of Czech musical identity in the compositions of Vítězslava Kaprálová; from evocations of Edwardian English childhood in the miniatures of Ethel Bilsland (world première recording) to Romantic expressions of spiritual melodies inflected with jazz and blues in the music of Margaret Bonds.

Florence Beatrice Price (1887-1953) was born in Little Rock Arkansas in 1887. Her musical education began at the age of three with piano lessons from her mother. At the age of 19, she graduated with the highest honours earning a double major in piano teaching and organ performance from the New England Conservatory of Music. Price is recognized as the first African American woman composer to achieve national and international success. Her *Sonata in E minor* (1932) is Price's most substantial work for solo piano. The sonata consists of three movements: the first is called "Andante - Allegro", the second movement is titled "Andante" and the third is a "Scherzo." The movements are strongly connected and each one reflects an array of influences from classical forms and German Romanticism, to spiritual melodies and plantation dances. The first movement explores two plantation themes that resurface in various guises as the sonata progresses. The second movement takes the second plantation theme of the first movement, and delves deep into the sound world of the spiritual. The third movement takes us on a virtuosic whirl around African American folk music and classical conventions.

Ethel Edith Bilsland (1892-1982) was an English composer, soprano and pianist. She was a Professor of Voice at the Royal Academy of Music in London where the Ethel Bilsland Award for Singing was established in her honour. Bilsland sang at the 1923 Proms in Queen's Hall alongside other giants of English classical music, such as the conductor Sir Henry Wood and the pianist York Bowen. Bilsland lived most of her adult life in Eltham, South London. She was widowed at an early age, and with the onset of the Second World War, vocal instruction was her way of ensuring security in her career, and in the upbringing of her two children. Bilsland wrote for voice, piano, chamber ensembles and orchestra. However, much of her output remains in manuscript. One of the few collections available to the public is the endearing *Birthday Party* (1918), a suite in which she dedicates the six piano miniatures to each of her young nephews. The *Birthday Party* was originally published as learning material for younger pianists. Yet, there is a highly personal character to each piece. Each miniature takes the listener through evocations of Edwardian English childhood; one cannot help but imagine the scenes of play with titles such as "Friends to Tea", "Peep-bo", "Tin Soldiers", "Battledore and Shuttlecock", "Ring o' Roses" and "Sleepy Song." This is a world première recording.

Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915-1940). It would be easy to define the young Czech composer Vítězslava Kaprálová by the men in her life. After all, her father, composer Václav Kaprál, was a student of Leoš Janáček; one of her professors, Vítězslav Novák, was a student of Dvořák; and her mentor and lover, Bohuslav Martinů, paved the way for Czech modernism. Yet Kaprálová forged her own identity, earning accolades on a par with her male counterparts. Her works were premiered by renowned musical institutions such as the Czech Philharmonic and the BBC Orchestra, with Kaprálová at the helm as their conductor. Kaprálová composed *Sonata Appassionata*, op. 6 (1933) during her time at the Brno Conservatory. The work is in two movements: the first is a harmonically rich movement that undulates beneath an ever-searching melody and is framed either side by a majestic and densely-

textured theme. The second movement opens with a simple folk-like theme that evolves over the course of six variations, climaxing with a devilish fugue and a return to the majestic chords that open the sonata. *Dubnová preludia* (April Preludes), op. 13 (1937) comprises four pieces: the first immediately stirs up striking dissonances and then escapes into a short-lived moment of playfulness. The second prelude is awash with impressionistic colours, while the third prelude presents a simple melody with sparse accompaniment. The final prelude is lively in character. It combines all the characteristics of the preceding preludes and brings the suite to a triumphant close.

Margaret Allison Bonds (1913-1972) was born in Chicago and grew up during a cultural renaissance led by African American visionaries and thinkers in all spheres. The home that Margaret lived in with her mother, Estella C. Bonds, was a cultural hub for artists and intellectuals alike. Her circles included composers such as Will Marion Cook, performers such as the soprano Abbie Mitchell and poets such as Langston Hughes. Her mother, Estelle, was a gifted musician and Margaret was instilled with the same passion. The younger Bonds later rose to prominence with her own works and performances, and came to represent the next wave of African-American composers in Chicago. Margaret Bonds' compositional output consists of solo piano pieces, ensemble works and art songs. As a composer, she fills European forms with spiritual melodies, blues harmonies and jazz rhythms. *Troubled Water* for solo piano was composed in 1967 and is often performed as a stand-alone work, though it belongs to a set called the *Spiritual Suite*. This set draws influence from specific spirituals, and in the case of *Troubled Water*, Bonds constructs this work around "Wade in the Water." Bonds encases the melody of this spiritual in jazzy chords and builds up to moments of gushing Romanticism. Yet, the distinctive "Wade in the Water" melody grounds *Troubled Water* in the unromantic reality of African American history. / *Liner notes by Samantha Ege*





Samantha Ege

FOUR WOMEN: MUSIC FOR SOLO PIANO BY PRICE, KAPRÁLOVÁ, BILSLAND, AND BONDS. Price: *Sonata in E Minor*; Bilsland: *The Birthday Party*; Kaprálová: *Dubnová preludia and Sonata appassionata*; Bonds: *Troubled Water* / Samantha Ege, pianist / Wave Theory Records WT2018006D.

Stepping confidently into the minefield of socially corrective art history, British pianist Samantha Ege offered up a touchingly personal and powerfully interpreted collection of works titled *Four Women* in May of 2018. Born of a personal investigation into early 20th century composer-pianist Florence Price and her student and friend Margaret Bonds, Ege's distinctive pianistic voice shines brilliantly through this insightful program of solo works.

Ege titles the album after a Nina Simone ballad about African American women's experiences in the United States. Simone, herself a skilled classical pianist, was denied acceptance to the Curtis Institute of Music, ostensibly on the basis of race, and hustled as a cabaret pianist-turned-vocalist in Atlantic City before receiving her artistic due. Ege concedes a revisionist curiosity on this point: how might Nina Simone's story be different had she been connected to a historical community of Black female classical musicians? In a more practical sense, Ege wonders as an educator what happens when gifted musicians don't see their identities represented in the canon.

Lurking behind every noble feminist rediscovery project is the ghost of Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, enumerating the perils of trying to contextualize women's work in a rubric for greatness designed to exclude them. We cringe at the grasping that can undergird these types of projects, and recoil further when they accidentally affirm the canon's judgment with clumsy presentations of new voices in old music.

No grasping here: Ege's account of her encounters with the music of Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, and Vítězslava Kaprálová call to mind the experience of finding home in a place one has never been.

She describes immediately connecting to Kaprálová's musical language and Price's distinctive voice, rich with historical depth and empathy. That feeling is palpable in her playing. Beyond the significant historiographical effort of *Four Women*, the project highlights the piano itself as a musical shapeshifter, and Ege as an immensely creative soloist.

Ethel Edith Bilsland's *The Birthday Party* delights in twinkling, well-tailored phrases suited for happy weekends at home. In this premiere recording, the pianist-storyteller plays all of the characters in neatly dramatized bedtime tales from *Peep-Bo* to *Sleepy Song*. In an interview given the day she recorded the album, Ege remarked poignantly that *The Birthday Party*, with six movements dedicated to Bilsland's six nephews, is a rare artifact of a woman's creative work shaped lovingly by her familial attachments and obligations. Later, Bilsland literally boxed up her compositions and put them in the attic to focus on a stable career as a singing teacher.

For Kaprálová, a young Czech composer-conductor, the piano is liquid orchestra, alternately roaring, destroying, dripping, and flowing within the landscape of a complex emotional life.

Margaret Bonds' piano is a dancing body singing out as its feet step assured polyrhythms.

Florence Price's *Sonata in E Minor* puzzles and delights in its deliciously unclassifiable synthesis of neo-classical harmonies, plantation melodies, modernist chromaticism, and larger-than-life earth-shaking orchestrations. In an unforgettable opening fanfare, the piano announces itself with the swinging figures of a French baroque overture that slide down to a jazz swing and back up to a Renaissance cadence. One particularly satisfying transition in the first movement drops neatly from rhapsodic cadenza to a coy song, the bass line creeping up in half-steps while a soprano voice sings a light folk tune. The second movement broadens warmly somewhere between a Romantic sonata and a hymn, and the third contrasts mischievous scherzo moments with unapologetically beautiful waterfalls of sparkling pianistic colors.

With this project, Ege opens the doors to her self-made musical home, inviting us to appreciate a new canonical architecture. Movement flows into movement, piece to piece with an unbridled vitality, musical and emotional complexity, and singularity of voice. At the heart of it all is an uncompromised sense of belonging to itself which makes the question of belonging to the canon seem like a limp afterthought. *Four Women* is truly a gem for pianists, listeners, musicologists, and cultural thinkers alike.

Cara Search

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Vítězslava Kaprálová

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