

Jos. B. Foerster

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On Foerster's 70th birthday

Czech composer Jos. B. Foerster will be celebrating his 70th birthday on 30 December 1929. After Janáček's death, he has been the Nestor among Czech composers; his jubilee will be generously feted. Since November, there have been concerts of his works almost daily (sometimes two on a single evening), the National Theatre is preparing a cycle of his operas, a specially founded Foerster Society is in charge of releasing his many works old and new, the Melantrich Verlag is publishing a comprehensive memorial album, edited by Artur Rektorys – all in testimony to this important and meritorious phenomenon of Czech music.

Touching on the name Janáček (who was still young when he was taken away last year, unexpectedly and prematurely), one can scarcely imagine a greater contrast than the one between the two masters – Janáček's brutal, naturalistic vitality versus Foerster's cultivated formalism, quasi enforced with religiosity and elegance: Janáček's eruptive, later outbreak of creative madness after long years of unsuccessful groping, opposed to Foerster's steady growth to maturity from the outset as a dignified, fine musician [1]

The young Foerster (he still calls himself Josef Foerster Jr.) learned both the musical métier and the noble conception of art from his father [1]. After giving up studying once and for all at the polytechnic college for which he had been groomed, he became Dvořák's successor at the organ of St. Adalbert's Church in 1889; he even became choirmaster with the Franciscans at 30.

He was already composing industriously; his first symphony was done in 1886 and *Deborah*, his first opera, was performed in 1891. The literate, cultivated young Foerster also became the music reporter for *Národní listy* (1884–1893), where his merits garnered much appreciation in the service of the modern and progressive.

In 1888 Foerster married the youthful Berta Lauterer, a singer at the National Theater; the marriage was to determine the course of his career. He followed her to Hamburg in 1893 when she was engaged at the State Opera there and where he became a teacher at the conservatoire and, again, a music reporter (lastly for the *Hamburger Nachrichten* newspaper). He also became friends with Gustav Mahler, who conducted his Third Symphony for the first time.

It was also in Hamburg where Foerster's great, mature compositional activity actually began; *Eva*, his most successful opera, was written there, along with *Jessika* after that. Mahler engaged Foerster's wife for Vienna in 1903, whence he again followed her, remaining there until the revolution. He did not return to Prague until 1919, after 25 years' absence, where he became a professor at the newly-organised State Conservatoire; after succeeding to Master Professor in 1923, he became dean of that institution for the third time in his anniversary year. He also lectured at Karls-Universität, which bestowed on him a doctorate degree *honoris causa* for his 70th birthday; Foerster was the first musician to receive the tribute since Dvořák.

The artistic harvest of his rich life is extraordinarily vast, comprising nearly 150 opus numbers. Foerster biographers divide his work into three periods; the preliminary one extends to the end of his sojourn in Prague (1893), during which his work initially had little consistency. Smetana and Dvořák had a strong effect on him, and the influence of foreign composers such as Grieg and Tchaikovsky are traceable in the origins of his music at that time. Foerster's individuality emerged only gradually, coming to the fore in his first two symphonies, the opera *Deborah* and his *Stabat mater*.

His Hamburg sojourn marks his second period, of which *Eva*, music's first Czech peasant opera, is the apex. The libretto is by the same woman who wrote *Jenůfa* and it is drawn from the same milieu – but what a difference

there is between Janáček's conception and Foerster's! With Foerster there is scarcely a trace of folklore; realistic drama is spiritualised and rises at the end to almost mystical sublimity. To this day, it is one of the most important works in Czech opera.

Foerster is often and mistakenly thought of as a mere lyrical composer. Indeed, his lyricism is one of his predominant characteristics, but it is always linked closely to life. That is why he can be a powerful dramatist at decisive moments, as his operas evince at every step. Nor does his oft-quoted mysticism ever lose touch with life on earth; he is not a mystic like Blůzina, who merely happens to touch this world from faraway celestial bodies. On the contrary, he is always inspired by life, with which he always has an positive relationship.

That is also the explanation for his religiosity; although it is not demotic like Dvořák's, neither is it an absolute translation into spheres far removed from everyday life. Foerster's god and angels always appear in human guise and the artist speaks to them in a manner familiar to people.

Apart from the aforementioned *Third Symphony* and *Jessika*, he wrote an enormous number of Lieder in Hamburg. (Over 300 are printed; adding the unpublished ones makes a total of perhaps about 1,000 – but who can count them?). He also composed choruses, most of them for male voices, of extraordinary importance in the development of Czech choral singing.

After Hamburg came his Vienna period. His personality became ever profounder, the hymnal paeans to God and Love which he sang becoming more and more inward and tender. The *Fourth Symphony* arrived, the most grandiose of the four and a glorification of the Easter miracle; his lyrical chamber opera *Die Unüberwundenen* ["The Unvanquished"] is replete with endless longing.

Foerster's music kept flowing – Lieder, chamber music, symphonic poems – while he once again became a newspaper reporter (for *Die Zeit*) [1] But then came his long-desired return to Prague. It brought the composer (now 60) new recognition – and heavy blows struck by Fate. His young son passed away, and that death reshaped the physiognomy of Foerster's music in his final years, although he was not even technically unreceptive to the new outlooks of the postwar era. It did not become atonal, of course – that would have contradicted his innermost nature – but it did turn from the predominantly consonant *typus* to the dissonant. [2]

But let us not forget that Foerster, the composer, was also a poet and an essayist. He wrote the libretti for his last two operas (he at least versified *Eva* himself). A fine connoisseur of all art and culture, his collected essays and newly-published memoirs are among the most valuable in Czech literature.

Foerster's life was rich and full; his significance for Czech music is that of a mediator between the heroic generation of Smetana, Dvořák and Fibich and the modern era. Although Foerster is firmly rooted in the classical period, his further development gave fresh impulses to our music – impulses only becoming tangible today as his work becomes the shared property of the entire people. This realisation is growing ever more common, resulting in the far-reaching echo of the celebration of his art and life.



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