Remembering Zuzana Ružičková

Personal Association

I was in high school when I first encountered Zuzana Ružičková through her Supraphon LPs. These recordings, impossible to find in the remote corner of Iowa where I grew up, were readily available from Qualiton Imports in New York. I first wrote her after hearing the harpsichord concerto by her husband Viktor Kalabis. Robert Tifft, would be the best person to compose a unique and intimate tribute for this legendary figure, and even more so since he is comfortable with the plethora of diacritical marks required to render authentic spellings in the Czech language! His websites can be found at www.jebebestyen.org/harpsichord.

All of us who treasure harpsichord history are indebted to Mr. Tifft for the fine essay and the private photographs that comprise our December Harpsichord News.

—L. P.

My first and only encounter with her in person took place in March 2010. I was in Budapest visiting our mutual friend János Sebestyén and planned a short train trip to Prague. Miloslav Špaňír accompanied me in hopes of hearing her to study harpsichord. Ružičková’s abilities were apparent from an early age, and she mastered her instrument, a noted teacher and performer of others, it occurred to me that a tribute should be written following their standard style, indicated the correct pronunciation of the name (rouge-ITCH-ko-va). Immediately it was obvious that a tribute should be written for Harpsichord News. She was a familiar name to me, for I had attempted to arrange a meeting with her during my singular one and a half-day visit to Prague, as I hoped to glean her insights into one of my favorite twentieth-century harpsichord compositions, Bohuslav Martinů’s Sottile (1959). Alas, Mme. Ružičková was not in Prague at that particular time, but she wrote a gracious letter apologizing for that absence, and she included her CD recording of the work, as well as several scores by her husband, Viktor Kalabis.

Rather than my quoting the writings of others, it occurred to me that a longtime friend and Dallas colleague, Robert Tifft, would be the best person to compose a unique and intimate tribute for this legendary figure, and even more so since he is comfortable with the plethora of diacritical marks required to render authentic spellings in the Czech language! His websites can be found at www.jebebestyen.org/harpsichord.

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Her Life and Career

Zuzana Ružičková, the legendary Czech harpsichordist, died in Prague on September 27, 2017. She was a virtuoso on her instrument, a noted teacher and recording artist, and a survivor of Nazi atrocities. In recent years she was the recipient of numerous honors celebrating her life and accomplishments.

She was born January 14, 1927, in the city of Plzeň where her father owned a successful department store. Her piano teacher, Marie Provazníková, introduced her to study harpsichord. Ružičková’s abilities were apparent from an early age, and preparations were made for her to study with Wanda Landowska at Saint-Leu-la-Forêt near Paris. The possibility of study abroad became impossible as the Second World War advanced, and in January 1942, Ružičková and her family were interned at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. She and the others transferred from more dangerous work within the camp. She and the others transferred from Terezín to Prague for the second time in December 1943 she and her mother were then sent to Germany as forced laborers, working on oil pipelines and at the shipyards near Hamburg. In February 1945 they were transferred to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, described by Ružičková as the “lowest part of hell.” As the war neared its end, German guards abandoned the camp and English and Canadian soldiers liberated the surviving prisoners on April 15. In July, after months in a hospital where she assisted needlessly as a translator, Ružičková and her mother returned to Plzeň only to find their home occupied and possessions gone. She credited her survival through all this not to courage, but “a hundred lucky moments” and her mother’s strength.

Described by the Nazis as a “model community,” Terezín was the only camp that allowed some artistic activities. Ružičková labored in the fields during the day but was able to continue her education. She studied harmony with Gideon Klein and attended concerts and lectures staged by other residents. She also befriended Fredy Hirsch, who was later credited with saving the lives of hundreds of Jewish children.

Ružičková’s father died at Terezín, and in December 1943 she and her mother were transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Here she once again came in contact with Hirsch, who told her to lie about her age so she could work alongside him as a teacher’s assistant, protecting her from more dangerous work within the camp. She and the others transferred from Terezín were scheduled for the gas chamber but were miraculously spared, most likely because of a disruption in camp routine after the Allies invaded France on June 6, 1944. Ružičková and her mother were then sent to Germany as forced laborers, working on oil pipelines and at the shipyards near Hamburg. In February 1945 they were transferred to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, described by Ružičková as the “lowest part of hell.” As the war neared its end, German guards abandoned the camp and English and Canadian soldiers liberated the surviving prisoners on April 15. In July, after months in a hospital where she assisted needlessly as a translator, Ružičková and her mother returned to Plzeň to find their home occupied and possessions gone. She credited her survival through all this not to courage, but “a hundred lucky moments” and her mother’s strength.

Despite conditions endured during the war, Ružičková’s passion for music remained undiminished. Her hands nearly ruined
from physical labor, she was determined to regain her skills. In Flerzí she studied piano with Bohdan Gsöllhofer, and in 1947 she was admitted to the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where she came into contact with several important figures who would later become her friends and students. Among these were the composers Viktor Kalabis and Zuzana Ružičková, who would later become her husband and a key figure in her career.

In 1962 she co-founded the Prague Chamber Solists with conductor Václav Neumann, and in 1963 she was among the first to perform Bach’s sonatas on four different occasions. She also performed regularly throughout Europe, including many notable conductors such as Herbert Blomstedt, Neville Marriner, and Susanne Mälcher. She continued her harpsichord studies in Paris, and in 1964 she recorded a Canticinni Inventions for harpsichord followed by a wedding gift, and significant works of a very successful duo with violinist Pierre Fournier, and she worked with many noted conductors including Serge Baudo, Herbert Blomstedt, Neville Marriner, and Bohdan Gsöllhofer, and in 1947 she represented the harpsichord as a modern instrument for the modern world.

Her goal was to recreate Bach’s music exactly as he would have heard it, but to communicate its essence to a contemporary audience. In her own words, “I am a synthesist who remains true to the style of a certain period yet does not eschew modern means.” Ružičková’s playing sounds like no one else, and her approach to interpretation is not easily classifiable. She operated within the mainstream of classical music, the result of her association with contemporary music and close friendships with the leading musicians of her day, and refused to confine herself to a particular niche.

Ružičková’s diminutive stature belied her unfailing sense of humor and delight in the ironic, and of course her incredible talent. The marriage of Viktor Kalabis and Zuzana Ružičková was one of exceptional devotion that lasted 54 years. It was through her encouragement that she returned to Germany as a concert artist little more than a decade after the war, and later to speak publicly of her wartime experiences in order to fight the “Auschwitz Lie”—the denial that the Holocaust ever took place. After Kalabis’s death in 2006, Ružičková devoted her last decade to preparing his manuscripts for publication by Schott Music and establishing a foundation to promote this music through concerts and recordings. This decade also saw numerous accolades for Ružičková herself, including the Czech Cultural Prize in 2002 and the German Heritage Fund Award the following year. Her 90th birthday was celebrated with interviews in the international press, the release of her complete Bach cycle in a 20-CD edition from Warner Classics, and the release of the film Zuzana: Music is Life, which screened at festivals throughout 2017 in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, London, and Prague. Her legacy to future generations is secure through the film and her recordings, but her most enduring legacy to those fortunate to have known her is the gift of her friendship. Her graciousness and generosity, the sincere warmth of her personality, her unfailing sense of humor and delight in the ironic, and of course her incredible talent, were unforgettable. She was an inspiration and comfort to all and a remarkable human being.

Further information is available through the Viktor Kalabis & Zuzana Ružičková Foundation: www.kalabismusic.org —Robert Tiff

Comments and questions are welcome. Address them to Larry Palmer: lpalmer@smu.edu or 10125 Cromwell Drive, Dallas, Texas 75229.

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