

**Holmer Becker** (\*1955) is a freelance composer who appreciates Czech contemporary music because it has retained its emotional content to this day. As co-owner of the Edition Brendel label, he has also published many chamber works by Karel Pexidor, Jiří Bezděk, and Pavel Trojan, and has been instrumental in their performance in Germany. He approaches his work with a high degree of self-criticism, claiming that at the moment of his departure from this world he does not want to be ashamed of his compositions.<sup>34</sup> His compositions are characterized by a persistent effort to give each phrase a distinct content and function within the whole. He thus arrives at a romantic material interplay with a centralized harmonic component. Becker is not a composer of avant-garde music festivals, but he is all the more revered by the audience of mainstream concerts. In his concert melodrama *Night*, the composer sets to music the poem of the same name by **Ivan Blatný**, which is part of the collection *Search for Present Time* published in 1947. The German version of the poem was composed by the poet himself (Die Nacht). It still has a tone of wartime sorrows in places, but its content is already directed towards intimate content emanating from the emotional world of a mature man who, in his nightly waking hours, reflects on the role of a close woman in his life. He concludes each stanza of his “song” with a refrain summarising the images by stating “*nebylas to ty*” [it wasn’t you] or “*tos byla ty*” [it was you]. He then concludes with the punch line “*tos byla já, to jsem byl ty*” [it was me, it was you], which in effect convicts all that has been said in the poem of his true love for his wife. The differentiated endings of each stanza structurally divide the poem into three larger units and the short punchline already mentioned. The longest of these is part two “*tos byla ty*” [it was you]), containing nine stanzas, three times the number contained in parts one and three (always “*nebylas to ty*” [it was not you]). The predominance of length in the second stanza is also indicative of the dominant substantive tone of the poem.

Becker’s music for melodrama follows the path of a more global expression of amorous emotion, i.e. in a musical form that does not quite fit into the poetic structure.<sup>35</sup> Its interruptions, however, give a lot of space to the poetic word (even the beginning of the melodrama consists of a recitation of the first verse without piano accompaniment) and only about

- <sup>34</sup> From a personal conversation with Jiří Bezděk during one of the car journeys from Pilsen to Prague.
- <sup>35</sup> For more details on the methodology of concert melodrama analysis see BEZDĚK, Jiří. Metodika strukturální analýzy koncertního melodramu: Aplikace na Fibichova Vodníka a další jeho významné melodramy. *Musicologica Olomucensia*. Olomouc: Palackého univerzita Olomouc, 2021(1), 38.

a quarter of the way through the piece do the recitation and piano sound together. Even so, this quarter is significant to the overall shape of the work. Among other things, it is here that the dramatic climax is found when the music underlines an inner personal confession. See the penultimate stanza of the second text block:

*To byly matka teta a babička To byly děti synovci a vnuci To byly věže hodiny  
Tos byla ty*

*That was mother aunt and grandmother  
These were children, nephews and grandchildren Those were the clock towers  
That was you*

From the point of view of the distinctive musical component, which is a prerequisite for concert melodrama, one can trace sonata roots in Becker's composition, which the author realizes in accordance with the local tuning of the individual verses. The exposition and free reprise are made up of the first 19 bars of the piece (p. 4) and its last 26 bars (p. 8).<sup>36</sup> The area of the main theme from a first subject group is, however, strengthened in thought in the version where a distinctive melody is interspersed in the upper voice. See the following example (the observed section is up to C).

Example 1.

The theme from the second subject group area does not contain such a coherent musical flow, but it does act as a commentary on the text. See the following example from the exposition.

<sup>36</sup> The pages are taken from EBR 1523.

allegretto  
mf

Und alle Frauen kamen hier vorbei  
Alle Städte kamen hier vorbei Und alle versteckten  
etwas breiter  
mp

C

Auf dem Dorffriedhof  
kämpfte nur eine Ziege mit dem Kranz aus  
Kartoffelkraut  
Wer lag dort in dem Grab?

Wer schief dort?  
Wer war es bloß  
du warst es

**A** *andante* *mp*

Es war nur der Wind der diese  
Geräusche lockte  
Aus der Flasche die hinter dem Grab  
lag  
Von der Blechtafel mit der Zikorien-  
reklame  
Wer war es bloß

nicht **B** du warst es nicht

Example 2.

The tonal-harmonic world of Becker's musical expression can also be grasped in the examples presented. The fundamental is the key, but its harmonic representatives are strongly complicated by melodic non-chordal tones to the point where harmonic functions can only be determined hypothetically. For example, in the first bar of No. 1, we can hardly speak with certainty of a tonic or subdominant in F minor. The result of such an approach is then a predominant number of verticals whose construction falls within the realm of modern chords (see, for example, the second bar in No. 2). Interesting in this connotation is the role of the diminished seventh chord, which is used extensively in the piece intense places. Because Becker's speech is not epigonally Romantic but uses only elements of it, even the diminished seventh chord does not sound worn out but is artistically credible. In the spirit of the above, it is safe to guess that Becker's *Noc* may continue to appear on the concert stages of mainstream concerts.