

# Jiří Tancibudek and Bohuslav Martinů's *Concerto for Oboe and Small Orchestra*

*Janice B. Stockigt*

---

This edited extract is taken from a series of interviews held in Adelaide at the home of Jiří and Vera Tancibudek in February 2000. These interviews were undertaken as part of the project the History of the University Unit of the History Department at the University of Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of these meetings was to record the biography of Czech oboist Jiří Tancibudek, who, in January 1950, left Prague and the position of principal oboist of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. In the quest for a situation outside his homeland, the most exciting offer of a position came from Rafael Kubelík who, after leaving Czechoslovakia in 1948, was appointed conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1950). Kubelík's proposal of a position with this orchestra appealed to the Tancibudeks, not only because of the professional status of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, but also because this meant they would be based close to Canada, where members of Vera's family were planning to settle. However, upon their visit to the Immigration Department of the United States of America in Germany, it was discovered that although Jiří could immediately enter America, Vera's status put her into a quota, and there would be a delay of at least three years before she could join her husband. This led to the decision to accept the invitation from Eugene Goossens (brother of Leon Goossens, a former teacher of Tancibudek) to teach at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. As a performer and teacher, Tancibudek has had a significant impact upon Australian audiences, composers, and students, and it is probable that his outstanding musical and performing qualities played some part in easing bans imposed by the Australian Musicians' Union upon the employment of European players in Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) orchestras.

---

Although Jiří Tancibudek knew that Bohuslav Martinů had been violinist with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, their paths had never crossed. Following his departure from

---

<sup>1</sup> The History of the University Unit was established to promote and facilitate research and publication about all aspects of the history of Melbourne University. The world premiere of Martinů's *Concerto for Oboe and Small Orchestra* was performed by Jiří Tancibudek when he was principal oboist of the Victorian (now Melbourne) Symphony Orchestra, and a member of the teaching staff of the Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne.

Czechoslovakia in January 1950 Tancibudek, who was then attempting to establish a new career, wrote to Martinů, who replied (in Czech), and appended a recommendation (in English) which could be used by Tancibudek in his quest for a position. Martinů's letter reads (in translation):

New York 6 April 1950

Dear friend,

Your letter came rather late, so I am answering immediately and hope that my answer will still reach you in time. However, if you are no longer there, that would be even better because it could mean that you have already received some invitation, and that you have a good job. I can imagine that you are already impatiently waiting for my letter and some help. But unfortunately, I have to tell you quite honestly, that in this matter, I cannot do anything at all for you. Such things as engagements, etc., are entirely in the hands of officials or people I do not know, and with whom I never come into contact. I receive many requests from people like yourself, but I am quite powerless to help them. To secure a position in an orchestra is truly complicated ... It is the same story in Canada. I don't know the situation in Australia, but I think Australia might be easier ... Just recently, the USA accepted half a million emigrants, so perhaps you might have the luck to be one of them. I am really terribly sorry that I cannot help you to get a job in an orchestra here ... But now, at least, I hope that the following might help you ... Towards the end of this letter I write a type of recommendation which you should show to a professional musician, or music lover who has some influence with important people—members of an audition panel. Perhaps some of them might even know my name ... Please don't think that I am unwilling to help you. On the contrary, I would always gladly help, particularly people from the Czech Philharmonic. I will certainly cross my fingers for you, and hope that you will eventually have good employment. I wish you lots of courage, and plenty of good luck. Please do let me know how you are getting on.

With affectionate greetings

Yours

[signed] Bohuslav Martinů

To whom it may concern:

I would like to express special recommendation to anybody who could help in some way Mr Jiří Tancibudek now in Valka-Lager, Nurnberg, Merzfeld, who is an excellent oboe player, was a member of Czech-Philharmonic [sic] in

Prague, and I will be grateful to anybody who could facilitate his arrival to USA, or Canada or any place, where he could be jusefull [*sic*] and where his new destiny could be formed in a happier way. All my thanks for any help

[signed] B. Martinů

Bohuslav Martinů

Composer and prof.

of Princeton (N.J.) Univ.<sup>2</sup>

Following arrival in Australia in 1950, Tancibudek was often asked why his recital programs did not include works by Czech composers. Although small works for oboe existed, no major item was available; a substantial composition by a Czech master was required for the many solo appearances Tancibudek was beginning to make in his new country.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in 1950 Tancibudek wrote once more to Martinů, who was then in America, stating that he had always loved and admired the composer's music, and would be very happy if Martinů would consider writing something for the oboe which he, Tancibudek, could perform in Australia. By that time Martinů's fame was growing, and he was beginning to be considered a giant among Czech musicians—a composer whose stature approached that of Smetana, Dvořák, and Janáček.

A response from Martinů finally arrived in 1954 stating that he had been considering writing a concerto for Tancibudek, and had already begun to sketch the work. He hoped, moreover, that Tancibudek would give the first performance. Because of the time involved, Martinů asked if a commission could be arranged for the work. In 1955 Tancibudek received a further letter from Martinů stating that he, Martinů, would finish the concerto in about ten days, and would then send a copy of the score to Australia. Tancibudek was wished every success with performances of the work. Part of Martinů's letter reads (in translation):

I think your part is brilliant, and you always have enough time to breathe, and I am sure that you will have success with it, if not with this, then with nothing. Now, you have freedom to adjust virtuoso passages to suit your technique ... Try to get a good fee for the premiere ...<sup>4</sup>

Just before the arrival of this letter, another had come in which Martinů asked for a manuscript of 'preluding' type oboe passages that Tancibudek might use to warm up the

<sup>2</sup> Cited with the kind permission of Jiří Tancibudek, who also made the English translation of Martinů's letter.

<sup>3</sup> Shortly after their arrival in Australia, a full length oboe recital was given by Jiří and Vera Tancibudek (possibly the first of its kind ever given in Australia), arranged by the Sydney Conservatorium. This led to a multitude of invitations to play concerts for the numerous and extremely active music clubs that existed in suburban Sydney and throughout country centres of New South Wales.

<sup>4</sup> Cited with the kind permission of Jiří Tancibudek, who also made this translation. When Tancibudek received the first contract for the premiere performances, the ABC offered a fee of AUS £8 per performance of a world premiere of a new work by a major composer. Naturally, this offer caused distress. Tancibudek visited the office of the ABC's Music Supervisor for Victoria to advise that he was afraid he could not accept the terms of the contract, but already there had been publicity about this new work, and brochures had been printed. After two or three weeks, the ABC reconsidered, and offered a fee of AUS £250 for all five performances.

instrument—passages specifically suited to his tone and technique. Such examples would enable Martinů to fashion the oboe part from Tancibudek's own playing. So the oboist obliged the composer by preparing a manuscript of excerpts from passages of the type he played as warming up exercises. The manuscript, which should have been posted by registered mail, was inadvertently sent by ordinary airmail. Some weeks later Martinů wrote to say that the musical examples had not arrived, and in his impatience to get on with the work he had used Eugène Bozza's *18 Etudes* as a guide to the possibilities of the instrument.

In 1955 a score of the concerto eventually arrived in Australia. At that time Tancibudek, who was now established in Melbourne as principal oboist of the Victorian Symphony Orchestra, was about to travel to Sydney to deputise as principal oboe with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The oboe part of the concerto began to be copied from the score during a sea voyage between the two cities. The ABC programmed the premiere of Martinů's concerto for performance during a series of Subscription Concerts to be given in Sydney during the 1956 season. John Champ (whom Tancibudek had known from the time of arrival in Australia) facilitated sponsorship of the new work through personal contacts with the Sydney newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, and US\$750 was sent to Martinů in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Martinů's *Concerto for Oboe and Small Orchestra* was premiered in August 1956 at the Sydney Town Hall, with Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt conducting the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Jiří Tancibudek as soloist. Five performances were given over two Red Series, two Blue Series, and one White Series of ABC Subscription Concerts.

Martinů's new concerto was first heard in Europe in 1958, when it was performed in Hamburg by Tancibudek and the North German Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Schmidt-Isserstedt. In that same year Tancibudek played the work in Vienna with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra conducted by Felix Prochazka (a performance recorded for Austrian Radio), in England in a performance conducted by Moris Miles (recorded for the BBC on the Third Program), and in Vancouver. In 1964 Tancibudek performed the concerto in Frankfurt with the Hessischer Rundfunk Symphony conducted by the American conductor Dean Dixon. Further Australian performances of the *Concerto for Oboe and Small Orchestra* were given by Tancibudek in Melbourne with the Victorian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Karel Ančerl (1961), in Adelaide with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra conducted by José Serebrier (1977), in Sydney with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by Louis Frémaux (1981), and in Canberra with the Victorian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Hiroyuki Iwaki (1981). Tancibudek's performances of this work have always been well received. In 1977 he recorded the concerto with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra conducted by Elyakum Shapirra, whose great interest in the score resulted in a highly satisfying performance from the orchestra. In 1980 a recording was issued on a long-playing disk, together with concertos of Haydn and Telemann.<sup>6</sup>

Originally Martinů had written two cadenzas into the concerto to allow a double display of virtuosity by the soloist. When, in 1958, Tancibudek eventually met the composer at Basel,

<sup>5</sup> In a letter dated 26 November 1956 Martinů stated that he had not yet received the payment. A letter dated 25 August 1957, however, advised Tancibudek that the sum had arrived.

<sup>6</sup> On the SAREC (South Australian Recording Company) label. In August 2001 the SAREC LP performance was remastered and issued on CD (ABC Classics: 461-703-2) as the first of a new series 'The Australian Heritage,' a sub-label of ABC Classics devoted to recordings of historic value made by artists whose musical legacies are of lasting influence on Australian culture.

the work was still unpublished. At that time, they both agreed that for a relatively short work (it takes about seventeen minutes to perform) one cadenza might be sufficient. Thus, Martinů asked the publisher (Max Eschig) to include only the first of the cadenzas in the edition, but following Martinů's death in 1959, Tancibudek included both cadenzas in performances he gave of this work.<sup>7</sup> Despite Martinů's non-receipt of the manuscript that Tancibudek had prepared for him, and notwithstanding Martinů's reliance on the Bozza's *18 Etudes*, Tancibudek is firmly convinced that the concerto is a highly satisfying work to play. Although successful performance requires great virtuosity from the performer (with moments of real difficulty), the writing for oboe is always highly idiomatic: it is a 'playable' work. The composition is fresh, and although not styled in the brilliant modern idiom (the harmony is relatively simple), it is completely original. 'Martinů was unconcerned with new styles of composition, remaining true to himself, and achieving results that were fresh, vital, and enjoyable.'<sup>8</sup> For Tancibudek, the graveside speech made at Martinů's funeral by Marcel Mihalovici (a French composer of Roumanian origin, and a close friend of Martinů), sums up the qualities of the composer:

At a time when so many of our friends lost themselves in anxious self questioning and experimentations, Martinů went his own way and remained himself . . . he had the courage to express himself in a simple and accessible idiom where attention to detail never obscured the greatness of the theme. He was modern while remaining attached to the most authentic classic tradition. His music is contemporary since it expresses essentially the deep problems of our time . . .<sup>9</sup>

Although Martinů and Tancibudek met on one occasion only, Tancibudek found the composer to be a delightful man, 'tall, unassuming, shy, softly spoken, most warm hearted and human, immediately friendly and sympathetic, extraordinarily kind, obliging, humble, and a lovely person—that is all I can say.'<sup>10</sup> A trip to the village of Polička, birthplace of Martinů, could have been arranged for Tancibudek during his visit to Prague in 1990, but because of a number of commitments during this time, he was unable to accept the offer, much to his later regret.

Finally, it is notable that Martinů's *Concerto for Oboe and Small Orchestra* has enjoyed great success. It has been recorded by a number of artists, including Heinz Holliger and Ingo Goritzki, and apart from its many performances in concert halls throughout the world, the work is frequently included in as an item in international oboe competitions, often as a compulsory work in the final stages.

---

<sup>7</sup> The autograph of the second cadenza is now kept at the Martinů Museum in Polička, Czech Republic. Although several copies of the concerto exist, Martinů's autograph score remains missing. Dr Ale Bezina from the Martinů Institute in Prague holds the hope of locating the original.

<sup>8</sup> Jiří Tancibudek, from the interviews taped in February 2000.

<sup>9</sup> From the speech of Marcel Mihalovici, delivered at the burial of Bohuslav Martinů at Pratteln, 1 September 1959. The English translation from the French was kindly provided by Jiří Tancibudek.

<sup>10</sup> During the interviews Martinů's cartoons and illustrations—so simple, yet expressive and charming—were recalled. These seem to encapsulate the personality of the composer, and reflect a quality to be heard in his music.