



## LUKÁŠ VASILEK: YOU MUST TAMPER WITH MARTINŮ'S CHORAL MUSIC

*“Performances are outstanding throughout. The voices are fresh and responsive, and Lukáš Vasilek once again proves that he is a true master of choral conducting. There is also an excellent, detailed booklet note by Vít Zouhar,”* wrote Ivan Moody in his review of Martinů Madrigals that was selected as Editor’s Choice in Gramophone March issue. All above confirm that Lukáš Vasilek and Martinů Voices have made the best of the autograph scores, getting as close as possible to the composer’s intentions, in all the articulation and dynamic nuances. Now you can take a detailed look at the whole process of creating this awesome recording with choirmaster Lukáš Vasilek in our interview.

**Your new album, titled Madrigals, presents Bohuslav Martinů’s complete choral oeuvre. Do you deem it to be extensive?**

Even though all the pieces have fitted on to a single disc, I would say that the album is extensive indeed. The compositions may be quite short, yet they are highly concentrated. Each of them bears its own story, which is rendered by means of a large volume of music, with the listener actually having to absorb a great variety of stimulations – intellectual, expressive, as well as purely musical.

**Did Martinů prescribe the type of ensemble who should perform the cycles?**

In the titles or secondary titles, Martinů used such words as “madrigal”, “song” or “duet”. That indicates that he might have had chamber formations in mind. On the other hand, the texture of some of the cycles’ sections is very compact, the phrases are difficult as regards breathing, while the required sound is too big. Had it not been for the titles, one could thus assume that Martinů had a larger chorus in view. We have opted for the chamber form in which, in my opinion, the pieces sound perfect, although it is extremely demanding for the singers.

**What was your aim when recording the album? What do you perceive as its added value?**

We have included Martinů’s music in virtually all our programmes – we like singing it. After all, our choir does bear his name. When it comes to the new CD, the great advantage was that we did not only rehearse the works with regard to their recording, we also performed them at several concerts. I could thus say that we had absorbed the pieces and that which we recorded was a truly thought-through and digested interpretation – that was our goal. As such a luxury is not commonplace in professional practice, it is – I hope – the added value. Naturally, Martinů is known abroad, yet his vocal music, the choral in particular, has scarcely been performed. Few recordings of Martinů’s choral pieces are available, so we will perhaps arouse greater interest in this significant part of the Czech choral oeuvre, actually one of the most significant.

**In his booklet notes, Vít Zouhar writes that Martinů’s musical idiom was particularly influenced by Czechoslovak folk music, English madrigals and Debussy. As a conductor, do you agree with this claim?**

Yes, there is no doubt as to his having been influenced by traditional music, as the folk texts alone attest to. In his pieces, we can clearly recognise the melodies and rhythms we know from Bohemian and Moravian folk songs. And it is also beyond doubt that Martinů was inspired by the English madrigal tradition, with the similarity

▶ being especially palpable in English-language Renaissance compositions. When it comes to Debussy, it may be questionable, though, as he actually only wrote a single choral cycle a cappella, *Trois Chansons de Charles d'Orléans*. In a way, it does sound similar, yet it is difficult to say whether this short piece could have served as a major source of inspiration for Martinů.



**The cycles date from between 1934 and 1959. Do they reflect the development of Martinů's compositional style?**

Absolutely. The oldest piece, *Four Songs about the Virgin Mary*, for instance, is really splendid, yet one can sense that at the time Martinů was still somewhat struggling with the choral texture. The other, later, choral works are more stable in this respect. Nevertheless, each of the cycles is different, and each of them is difficult to render in its own way.

**How did Martinů actually write for singers?**

Working out the vocal parts is quite difficult. It may sound good, even come across as easy and light when a choir has rehearsed the music and absorbed it properly. The aim, of course, is to attain that the audience feels precisely that way at a concert. Yet the path is quite thorny for the performers. The voices are often led almost instrumentally, the chords are not easy to tune, the rhythms occasionally do not match the correct Czech declamation. By and large, you must tamper with Martinů's choral music – actually, it is necessary to complete it to a certain degree. Yet when you do take the trouble, it is well worth the effort, and genuine gems come into being.

**What texts did Martinů use?**

The pieces featured on our album are exclusively set to Bohemian and Moravian folk poetry. In terms of the themes, most of them focus on love in all its forms – desire, amorousness, bickering, pining. Two of the cycles treat spiritual topics, yet in a specific manner, that is, on the basis of the traditional retelling of well-known sacred subjects, presenting stories from the lives of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. They are in fact folk fables that, with a lightsome hyperbole, set serious spiritual themes into the Bohemian and Moravian rural milieu.

**What is the parallel between Bohuslav Martinů and the name of your ensemble?**

Martinů bests renders the music period we most often feature at our concerts. What's more, he was a Czech composer, and we enjoy performing his works. When we took all these aspects into account, it was clear as to how to denominate our choir. In this connection, there

is also quite an interesting parallel with our new album. We were, of course, aware that Martinů Voices would somehow be expected to make a CD containing Bohuslav Martinů works. But we did not want to take the plunge, since we knew of the tricky nature of his choral pieces. Hence, we waited for a long time before deciding to embark upon such a project. That is one of the reasons why our debut Supraphon CD did not feature music by Martinů but Jan Novák, who, by the way, deserved an album that would redeem the debt on the part of Czech choral scene.

**How many singers participated in the recording of the album?**

We have made it in our basic configuration, that is, 13 singers – four sopranos and three other voices each. Depending on the repertoire, we have accomplished a few other projects with a higher number of singers, mostly about 25. That was, however, not the case of this CD.

**Martinů's music as recorded by Martinů Voices at the Martinů Hall... Was that an intention?**

We sought a hall with specific acoustics, and I think that the Martinů Hall was an ideal choice. Its acoustics are interesting, and it is pleasant to sing and work there. Yet the fact that the hall is named after the composer whose music we recorded there is a coincidence.

**Did you work with the same recording team as previously?**

Yes. We had collaborated with the recording director Milan Puklický and the sound engineer Jakub Hadraba previously on other projects, and I think it works well between us. In addition, the two gentlemen have always been patient with me, otherwise it would not be possible. I am grateful to them, and the result will, I believe, confirm that our co-operation agrees with us.

**You invited the pianist Karel Košárek and the violinist Jakub Fišer to participate in the recording. What criteria did you base your choice on?**

The manner in which they play so the choice was clear. I had previously collaborated with the two artists on several Martinů Voices and Prague Philharmonic Choir projects. I have the feeling that we understand each other as regards the desired objective of our joint recording.

**What is the pillar of the Martinů Voices repertoire?**

By and large, it is the music by Bohuslav Martinů's contemporaries, composers of the first half of the 20th century or so. Our blood group is Poulenc, Ravel, Debussy. Yet we also pay significant attention to more recent and contemporary music. Of late, we have also focused on Romanticism – we quite enjoy Brahms's pieces, for instance. Virtually all of our programmes include Renaissance music, which helps us to trim the purity of sound. Moreover, our size and the manner of our singing have naturally made us incline to Baroque and Classicist music too. Accordingly, we don't shun anything, we perform whatever may agree with us, even though the pillar of our repertoire remains 20<sup>th</sup> century creation.

