

THE SPIRIT OF BACH

89-year-old Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková survived the horrors of three Nazi concentration camps and emerged to make a series of major Bach recordings. *Jessica Duchon* meets her



Sunlight streams into the top floor flat in Prague where Zuzana Růžičková has lived for half a century. The Czech harpsichordist, who turns 90 on 14 January, is more than a mere living legend. She was the first person to record the complete keyboard works of JS Bach, in the 1960s-'70s; Warner Classics has just re-released the results, on CD for the first time. They are a revelation, overflowing with colour, brilliance and *joie de vivre*.

Růžičková no longer plays, devoting herself now to revitalising interest in the music of her late husband, the composer Viktor Kalabis (1923-2006). But she happily talks all afternoon, her disciple Mahan Esfahani at her side, tobacco exerting a strong presence. When someone has survived Terezín, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, political censure under communism, and the early music movement, with all her humour, intelligence and humanity intact, you can't argue about the hazards of smoking.

'I'm amused to be presented as a romantic, as a sort of Slavonian from far woods not knowing anything about early music,' Růžičková remarks, twinkle in eye. 'It's quite the opposite! I knew, when I went to the west,



PRAGUE LEGEND: Růžičková at her home in the Czech capital; (left) with violinist Josef Suk in the late 1980s; (top right) with her husband, the composer Viktor Kalabis, in Bratislava in 1972

that my students and I would be regarded in this way, so I was very particular that they should be in touch with all the early music developments. Maybe I was too punctilious. I once recorded some Purcell, including a little march that ended with a dominant chord. I was not sure whether to play it da capo or not, so I wrote to Thurston Dart to ask. I got a funny reply: he said he thought it would be all the same to Purcell if he had me playing. I was very moved by this.'

Růžičková was born in Plzeň in 1927 into a well-to-do family who owned a department store. She was a sickly child, suffering from

tuberculosis. 'I wanted to play the piano, but the doctor advised against it.' When she fell seriously ill with pneumonia, her parents promised to give her anything she wanted if she recovered. Her choice: 'Piano lessons.'

Her teacher soon discovered her affinity with Bach and advised her to focus on the organ or the harpsichord. 'I was too weak for the organ,' she says, 'so I chose the harpsichord, though I'd never seen or heard one.' She applied to study with Wanda Landowska in Paris. But the German invasion scuppered her plans: the Jewish community of Plzeň were among the first to be deported to Terezín, her family included.

'We were interned in barracks at first; as soon as the local population was evacuated and we could go out, I went to look for a piano,' she says. She found a beat-up instrument in an attic; music helped sustain



her through the privations of two years in the bizarrely cultured concentration camp. 'Gideon Klein, the composer, used to give me lessons; he also gave me harmony exercises to work out. He was a fantastic personality. I was singing in choirs and I was supposed to sing in Hans Krása's children's opera, *Brundibár*.' But before the premiere, she and her mother were deported to Auschwitz. Her father died in Terezín.

'We knew when we were supposed to be sent to the gas chambers,' she recounts, 'because the Nazis made us address postcards to friends or family saying we were fine, postdated for the day after. Others had done this before. We knew what had happened to them.'

On the day that would have been their last, the Allies invaded. The Nazis needed manpower, so instead of being murdered, she was sent to slave labour in Hamburg, loading bricks on to ships, throwing them

from person to person. It wrecked her hands. Finally, she and her mother were incarcerated in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp; on its liberation she was half dead from what she says was bubonic plague.

'Bach could help me after everything I'd been through'

She insists her survival was not about courage. 'It was a hundred lucky moments,' she reflects. 'When bombs fell, you had to be lucky enough not to be underneath. But my mother was the greatest help. She lived for me; I lived for her.' And then: music. 'I tell my students that you have the capital of beautiful



concerts, poems, books, science, and nobody can take that from you. It's a world you can go into when the world outside is unbearable.'

After the war, Růžičková practised for 12 hours a day while her hands recovered. Having studied at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, in 1950 she gained a post there teaching piano to the composers' class. Here she met her husband. 'He was a wonderful pianist, and already into forbidden figures like Stravinsky and Bartók. We played a lot of modern music together – then we fell in love, but at first we couldn't marry because he was my student.' She tried to dissuade him from marriage because she was Jewish and subject to censure and persecution, 'but he didn't care'.

At that time in Czechoslovakia, the notion of a harpsichord career was 'a joke', she says. 'I went to the state concert agency and they laughed.' She could not afford a harpsichord and few were available to play. 'The Czech Philharmonic had one, but I wasn't allowed to use it. I would sneak in with the cleaners at 6am to practise before the staff arrived.'

She divided her time between harpsichord and piano, but eventually stuck with the former: 'I needed Bach. Unlike Beethoven, who shakes his fist at the heavens, Bach could help me after everything I'd been through. His music is above human suffering.' Her career picked up at last after she won the ARD International Music Competition in Munich in 1956.

Both Růžičková and Kalabis refused to join the Communist party and soon suffered for their stance. Kalabis was fired from his teaching job; Růžičková was forbidden to hold a post in Prague – 'How could you teach students about Bach, religion or Louis XIV without knowing how to explain them in the Marx-Lenin way?' she remarks, with ▶

ADVICE FOR LIFE

Harpichordist Mahan Esfahani on what he's learnt from Růžičková



TEA FOR TWO: Esfahani and Růžičková

'YOU OCCASIONALLY GET the feeling that a lot of harpsichord playing happens in spite of how deeply emotional Bach is, rather than being inspired by it. Professor Růžičková is quite the opposite of this.

'What I've learnt from her, first of all, is that having a set interpretation damages music. It's scary to walk out on stage thinking: "OK, I have ten interpretative choices for every bar to select from tonight." It's much easier to know exactly what I'm going to do. It's intimidating, not knowing, but much more liberating.

'One thing that she'll say occasionally is: "Don't forget to do X or Y, otherwise your

'She taught me that I'm not as certain as I thought I was'

colleagues will think you're an idiot!" You do it because other harpsichordists will know you've done your homework. We have a problem in Harpsichordland: we're not completely free. In Pianoland you're free, because the assumption now is that you express yourself. But if I decide to play a trill from the main note, not the upper one, there are ten jerks in the audience saying "he's stupid, he doesn't know any better...". So you have to throw them a bone. An early music person in New York wrote to me after a recital saying, "as would be expected from your personality, your interpretations were very individual". Is that supposed to mean that harpsichord interpretations shouldn't be individual? Of course they're individual!

'Růžičková taught me that I'm not as certain as I thought I was, that I'm not as good as I thought I was, and that I have to work much harder. And probably that you will never find the limits of a piece of music. There's always deeper you can go.'

JEAN-PIERRE LÉOIR



FIRST EDITION:
Erato producer
Michel Garcin presents
Růžičková with her 21-LP
Bach recording in 1975

sarcasm. Financially struggling, they could not afford a harpsichord until she sourced an Ammer in the DDR, with which she travelled thereafter. She was allowed, though, to teach two students on British Council scholarships. One was Christopher Hogwood. 'He could have been a great soloist, but he already knew he was a Renaissance man, wanting also to do conducting, editing and scholarship.'

Landowska remained her ultimate ideal. What did she admire so much? 'Everything,' Růžičková beams.

'Her musicality, her consciousness of form, her personality. I loved the way she handled the harpsichord, the way she thought about the instrument. She instigated its revival.'

If there was a nemesis, it was Gustav Leonhardt. 'I never attacked him, but he wrote to János Sebestyén, saying that he knows he is my student and that only a "primitive" could think of using a 16-foot register in Bach. He was puritan about what he thought was historic. But now we know the 16-foot was authentic after all.'

The orchestral quality of her Bach recording is no coincidence. 'That was my idea,' she confirms. 'You can say, "Everybody should listen as people listened in Bach's time", but that's not realistic. I took the Landowska way, and Mahan Esfahani takes it too. I want people to understand Bach.'

'Bach worked with colour a lot in the cantatas; there the text makes it evident what he meant. It's evident in the *Well-Tempered*

Clavier too, but you have to listen! I can create the impression of different instrumentation with different registers: this makes it understandable to the listeners.

'I once published a very cheeky experiment. I took an overture from a cantata, a sinfonia with a theme of eight bars. If you study Bach, you see he didn't like symmetry. These eight bars are instrumented with three in woodwind and five in strings, so I played it three bars on the lower manual and five on the upper manual.

I showed it to a colleague and a critic.' The recipient objected to her approach. 'I said: "But this is how Bach instrumented it; it's not symmetrical."

I was not the only one who felt like that – Karl Richter used to say that anyone who had listened to the Qui Tollis in the B minor Mass would never say Bach didn't have a 16-foot stop.'

As for the future of early music, Růžičková suspects a backlash is brewing. 'I've just read about a conference in Switzerland where they were saying: "Let's liberate ourselves from the idea that we must play as the composer wanted it. Why not express how we feel, as interpreters?" This idea may follow the strict early music era. It's a possibility.'

Talking to Růžičková, you feel anything is possible. Happy birthday, then, to one of the wonders of the musical world. ■

Růžičková's recordings of the complete keyboard works of JS Bach have been re-released in a 20-CD set by Erato. See Andrew McGregor, p90