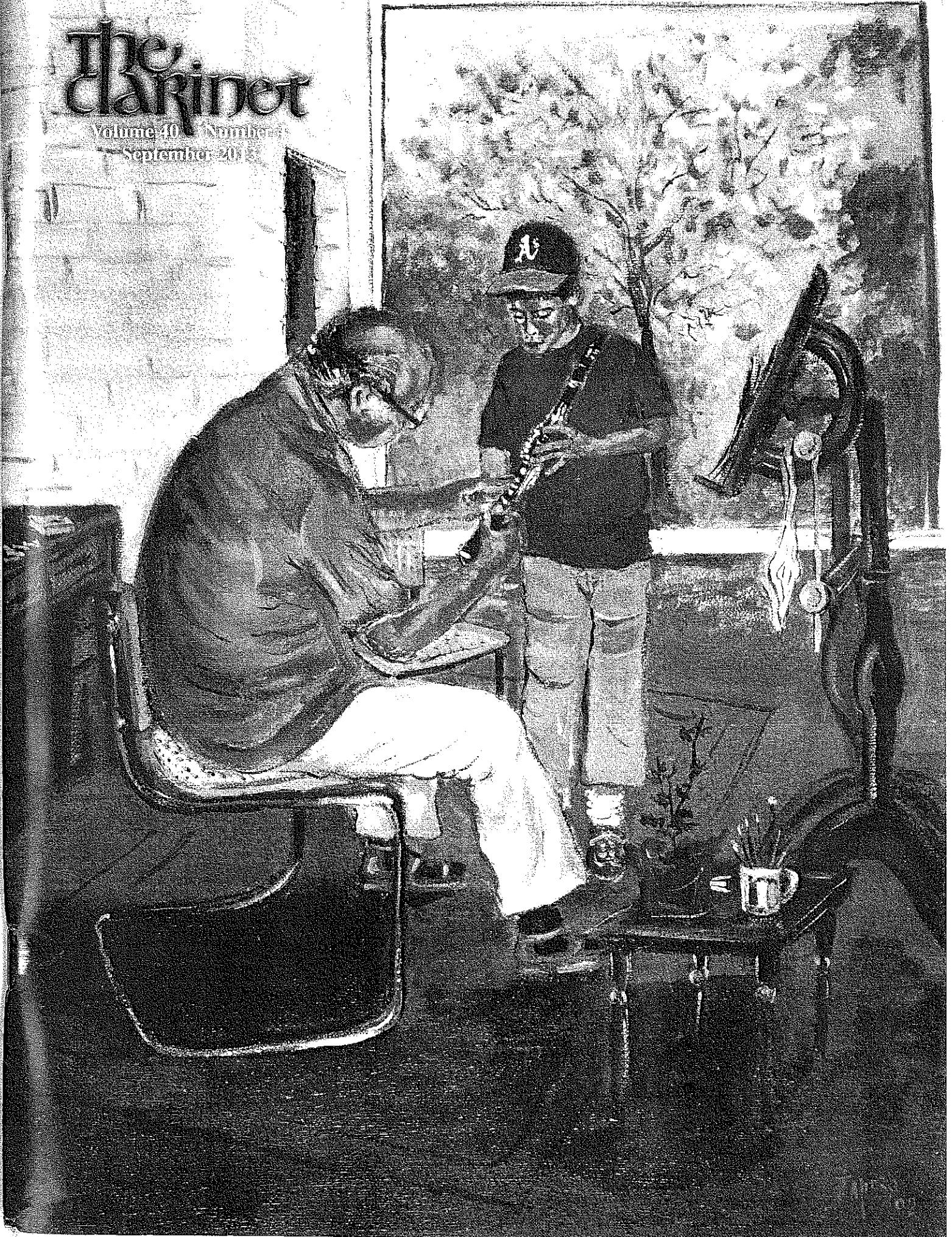


The Clarinet

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AMERICAN IN BRNO

One View of the Czech Clarinet Scene

by George Stoffan

“It’s not a good piece of cane,” I told Lukáš. “It’s a lousy reed.” I was testing some of my reeds when he arrived for his lesson, and then it occurred to me... “Do you know what I mean by ‘lousy?’” I asked. “Yes, I do. I am in the jazz band. I learn all my American slang there!”

Lukáš Dittrich is a student at the Janáček Academy of Music in Brno, Czech Republic (<http://english.jamu.cz/>). I received a Fulbright Award to serve as an artist-in-residence during my sabbatical from Oakland University. I lived in Brno between August 2012 and January 2013. I taught weekly lessons for the semester, performed a solo recital, surveyed many Czech works for

clarinet and learned much about aspects of pedagogy and performance unique to the Czech Republic.

Although I had studied some of the clarinet works of Czech composer Zbyněk Matějů, I had not been familiar with the Janáček Academy or Brno before I made my Fulbright application. Since I had been to Prague, Mr. Matějů advised me to explore coming to Brno. Most significantly, he believed, the Janáček Academy had a strong performance program that had exhibited high musical standards.

This intrigued me, and the result was a cultural experience reflected in my exchange with Lukáš. My goal was to help these stu-

dents become even better clarinetists and musicians, just as it is for me in my work at Oakland University. I sought to do so in ways that demonstrated respect for the performance traditions passed on to them by their former and current teachers. Our lessons also provided us opportunities to learn more about one another’s culture. By the end of the semester, I was better able to understand some of the differences and many of the similarities of Czech clarinet playing, in comparison to my own background and experiences. I also knew more of the Czech language, their educational system and experience in it and about Czech and Moravian traditions. I hope they remembered what I was able to share about reeds, fingerings and musical phrasing. I do know that they also learned some more English, more about American clarinetists, aspects of study in the U.S. and some American traditions. This was a cultural exchange in the truest sense of the phrase.

Even an historic overview would be beyond the compass of this article. Since many people asked me about going to Prague before I left, though, and how beautiful Bohemia must have been when I returned, I thought it might be helpful to share a few words about Brno. It is a two-and-a-half hour drive southeast from Prague and a part of Moravia. Brno is also two hours from Vienna, an hour from Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, and four hours from Budapest. The first Slavic tribes settled there in the eighth and ninth centuries, when the region first became known as Greater Moravia. Brno was first established as a town in 1243. Brno’s history, like that of the Czech Republic, is characterized by conflict and survival. Through the Thirty Years War and the turning back of Swedish troops, to the reign of the Hapsburg Empire, and to Nazi occupation and the Cold War, the buildings and architecture tell many stories. The patchwork of architecture in Brno ranges from the Gothic of the medieval period to the Functionalist style of the 1920s, and little of what one might consider to be contemporary. Brno is the second largest city in the Czech Republic, with about 400,000 residents. This includes about 90,000 college students. Masaryk University is the second largest public university in the Czech Republic, and the Brno University of Technology is one of the largest universities within Brno.

Some of the musicians who have visited

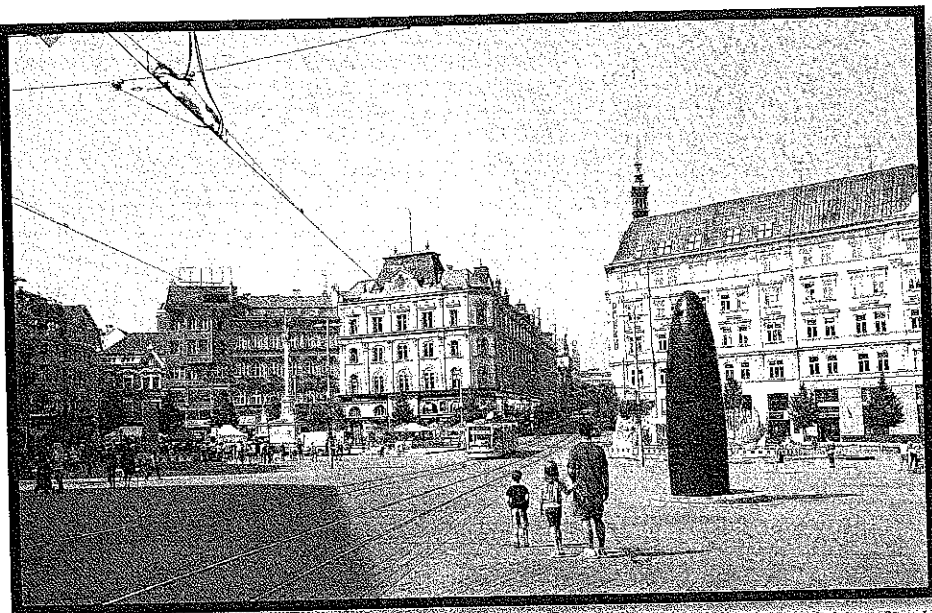


Lukáš Dittrich, one of the students, and me.

Brno or lived here include Mozart, Clara Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, Fritz Kreisler, Busoni, Tchaikovsky, Arthur Rubenstein, Pablo Casals and Max Reger. Mahler, Strauss, Bruno Walter and Charles Munch all conducted here at some point. Composers Erich Korngold, and, of course, Leoš Janáček, were born here, and Bohuslav Martinů was born in the area.

The Janáček Academy was built in 1862 and first utilized as a German Grammar School, a type of high school that excelled in the arts and humanities. Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, attended school here between 1865 and 1869. In 1949, the Janáček Academy of Music was established and moved into this former German grammar school. The musical tradition that inspired the formation of the Janáček Academy, however, found its roots in 1881, when Leoš Janáček started an organ school at a separate site. He later worked at what was known as the Brno Conservatory in 1919, also at a separate site. The Brno Conservatory is still operating today. As for the Janáček Academy, in 1959, the government mandated that the Music and Theater faculties be reduced to departments, and this structure remained in place for nearly 40 years. With the end of the communist era in 1989, the academic structure returned to one of two separate faculties—one for theater located in another section of Brno's city center, and one for music, in this former German grammar school. This building was renovated in 1995. In addition, many new faculty members were hired and courses were added throughout the 1990s. There are now 350 music majors in all instrumental and voice areas in the undergraduate and master's programs. There is a full symphony orchestra, many chamber music ensembles, a jazz band, a new music ensemble and a creative arts orchestra.

Vít Spilka extended the invitation for my residency there and coordinated all aspects of my visit. At the time, he was the dean of the Music Faculty. He has long been, and is currently, the full-time clarinet professor at the Janáček Academy. "Music faculty" in the Czech Republic is the term used for what we would call "music department," or "music school," in the U.S. When I went to see him during my first week there, he told me much about what to expect. The 10 students there typically receive two lessons a week, one from Vít,



I explore Náměstí Svobody, or "Freedom Square," at the center of Brno, with my children, for the first time. This is several blocks from the Janáček Academy and our apartment.

and another from Milan Polak, the other clarinet instructor. One of the students told me that this was not typical in the Czech Republic. The opportunity to study with both Professor Spilka and Polak, who also teaches at the Prague Conservatory, is one of the strengths of the Janáček Academy and one of the reasons he chose to attend. With my residency, they would receive three lessons a week for the semester. Lessons are 45 minutes long. There is no weekly studio or master class, as might be typical in U.S. music schools. They are required to perform in chamber music and in the orchestra each semester. There is not currently a wind ensemble. Vít indicated that most students' education to that point is centered on studying the solo repertoire, as study is focused on preparing students as soloists. Chamber music is a healthy part of their education, he said, because it encourages students to work in a more collaborative fashion. Because of the focus on repertoire in their studies, Vít and Milan asked that I might work with them in our lessons on orchestral excerpts. This helped fulfill a need for them, and it was an interesting approach and challenge for me as it provided some focus in my work with them. I was happy to oblige.

I found it helpful to learn about some of the differences in the Czech Republic's educational system. Parents will typically send their children to preschool for some or all of the years between the ages of 3 and 5. The last year is similar to kindergarten in the U.S. At the age of 6, school is com-

pulsory for Czech citizens. More than 95% of students attend public school, and the remaining 5% attend private school or are home-schooled. Children enter the first grade, and from that point the academic skills developed are similar to those developed in curricula in the U.S. At the age of 14, students will take an exam in order to gain entrance into a school that has a focus on a particular discipline. Those might include science, arts, technical and vocational schools, and, in the case of music, a conservatory. The Prague Conservatory is one example. One other type of school is a "gymnazium," or "grammar school." These schools have a broad-based curriculum, similar to liberal arts studies at our universities in the U.S., and serve as preparation for similar study at the university level. These schools are generally considered to be highly competitive. The entrance exam for a conservatory consists of an audition. Once in the conservatory, students study theory, history and piano, and have applied lessons and participate in ensembles and chamber music. The course of study is six years, and students must pass an exam to graduate. This consists primarily of a jury performance or recital. At this point, students would also audition for academy study. In the Czech Republic, there are two academies, the Academy of Music in Prague, and the Janáček Academy of Music in Brno. After six years of study at the conservatory, students would typically enter the academy level at the age of 20. Most of the current clarinet students at the Janáček

Academy come from conservatories, but a few come from gymnaziums. Many in the clarinet studio are from Prague, and several came to the Janáček Academy directly from the Prague Conservatory, in part, because Milan Polak is also on the faculty there. The Janáček Academy's undergraduate degree is a three-year program, but students are encouraged to remain for two additional years to obtain a master's degree for additional training, and for the fact that it has become more common and expected in the music performance field there to have a master's degree.

The natural arc, then, for someone studying music in the Czech Republic, is to attend public school, begin private instrumental study at the age of 8 or 9 for clarinetists (and earlier for pianists and string players), audition for and enter the conservatory at the age of 14, study there until the age of 20, and then enter the academy and study for three more years for an undergraduate degree, or five more years for a combined undergraduate and master's degree. It might be of interest to note that students do not pay tuition at any of these educational levels, including universities, as the institutions receive direct support from the state. At the time I was in the Czech Republic, there was a proposal in the Parliament that sought to begin collecting tuition fees from students, but, as one

can imagine, there has been great pushback from many of the students.

The students at the Janáček Academy are outstanding. Their repertoire requirements reflect that. The standard practice is to study three complete works each semester. There is a general list of repertoire for each semester over the course of the three years of study. Students' lessons are not graded, either in the form of individual lessons or an overall lesson grade at the end of the semester. They must pass an exam at the end of the semester in order to move to the next level. It's the equivalent of a jury in the U.S., but the time spent is more extended, in order to accommodate all of the repertoire, and the stakes are higher. Lesson study is aimed at preparation for this exam. Some of the repertoire the students were studying at the time included the Nielsen *Concerto*, Françaix's *Theme and Variations*, Debussy's *Première Rhapsody*, the Weber *Concerti*, and Brahms' *Sonatas*. Some of the Czech repertoire included Leopold Koželuh's *Concerto* and Ondřej Kukač's *Concertino*. My work with them included Beethoven's *Symphonies No. 4, 6, and 8*, Mendelssohn's *Scherzo*, Brahms' *Symphony No. 3*, Kodály's *Dances of Galanta* and Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 9*. A few of them brought in Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, and Smetana's *Šárka*, from *Mla vast* and *Overture to the Bartered Bride*. I noted with irony that I was being

asked for help with some Czech music, but they seemed to appreciate whatever input I could provide.

My focus on orchestral excerpts with them allowed me to explore parts, scores and recordings in a more in-depth way than I would have if we were working on a broad range of repertoire. The students had a collection of orchestral excerpts, but not full parts. Their knowledge of the excerpts was limited beyond the specific excerpt on the page, and the excerpt itself was often truncated or incomplete. I shared full scores of the works with them, and we listened to portions of the works in order to provide a fuller context. Their usual lessons are generally repertoire-driven, with an emphasis on preparation for competitions and the final jury exam. In contrast to their work on complete sonatas and concertos in their typical lessons, our emphasis on shorter passages was a departure for them. The students seemed to respond well.

The students were generally well prepared for each lesson. Every student, without exception, had outstanding technical skills and command of the instrument. Most of them were able to double-tongue. The common explanation was that conductors performed Smetana's *Overture to the Bartered Bride* at tempi too fast for single-tonguing, and that the excerpt was a part of every orchestral audition. Conductors expect that one will be able to double-tongue, and that this is requested in auditions. A few did this with great clarity and consistency in the *Bartered Bride* and in the 16th-note solo passage from the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4*. Much of what I was able to offer, beyond our work with the basic concepts associated with each excerpt, included listening to various recordings and engaging in some score study. This was effective because most students there were well grounded in their understanding of musical style, as a result of their solo repertoire work. When I did offer interpretive observations, I found that the students understood my characterizations of particular phrases, even if I had to demonstrate more through my own playing and singing or other forms of vocalization. Communicating musical ideas through imagery and metaphors, however, clearly slowed me down. In these moments, my language barrier had an impact on my teaching. Czech students continue to have English classes at the college level, and



these students' understanding of the language was excellent. However, I still had to choose my words carefully and slow down. These were helpful lessons for me as a general rule, even after I returned to the U.S.!

Some of the aspects of the teaching experience differed little from my teaching at Oakland University, and other aspects presented unique challenges. In the Czech Republic, and as in my teaching in the U.S., I found myself sharing similar observations regarding tempo, rhythm, dynamics and pitch, for instance, in a given passage. My challenge as a visitor came in the approach to tonal characteristics. I still think often of one lesson, in particular. In an attempt to achieve more clarity in this student's articulation, I made some suggestions regarding a more rounded embouchure, and a higher, more forward tongue position. He was able to do this, and although it took some time, I thought he had more clarity in both his sound and articulation. His response was that many Czech clarinetists would consider the sound to be "narrow." My attempt at a solution for clearer articulation also altered his approach to sound, which was based upon a freer and more flexible Czech sound tradition. At that point, rather than working with voicing, I encouraged him to play with a well-supported and focused airstream. This seemed to help him accomplish more consistency in his articulation without fundamentally altering his tonal approach. From that point forward, I attempted to seek out solutions to perceived sound and tonal issues within the context of the traditions these students had already cultivated to a high degree. This was the greatest learning experience for me as a teacher in my time there.

I also presented a recital. I performed Bernstein's *Sonata*, Gershwin's *Preludes*, arrangements of several of Rose's *32 Etudes* for clarinet and piano, Joan Tower's *Wings* and John Mackey's *Breakdown Tango* for clarinet, violin, cello and piano. My wife, Joan Hovda, performed the cello part, and Alena Zavadlíková, an outstanding graduate student there, performed the violin part. It was a very interesting cross-cultural collaboration in working with Alena and our pianist, Dana Drápelová, as we put together this program. The Czech students and faculty there really enjoyed *Breakdown Tango*. They had not heard of Joan Tower's work, or this particular arrangement of the Gershwin work by James Cohn, although



After our recital at the Janáček Academy on 12/17/12: Dana Drápelová, piano, Alena Zavadlíková, violin, me and Joan Hovda, cello.

they liked both of these works. They also appeared to be unfamiliar with the Rose etudes, or at least of the central role these etudes play in our studies in the U.S. They had all performed the Bernstein, and that has become quite popular there. It was gratifying to present these works and this music to an audience that was hearing much of it for the first time.

In addition, we attended many performances in Brno. We had the opportunity to interview Vít Spilka and Emil Drapela, the principal clarinetist of the Brno Philharmonic. In Part II of this article, I will share these aspects of my experience in Brno.

ABOUT THE WRITER...

George Stoffan received a Fulbright Award to serve as an artist-in-residence at the Janáček Academy of Music in Brno, Czech

Republic in the fall of 2012. He is associate professor of clarinet at Oakland University and principal clarinetist of the Oakland Symphony Orchestra. He previously served as principal clarinetist and concertmaster of the United States Air Force Band in Washington, DC. Mr. Stoffan has performed in recital at International Clarinet Conferences in Kansas City, Atlanta and College Park, MD, and in February 2011 performed in recital at the National Association of College Wind and Percussion Instructors conference in Gainesville, FL. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree in Clarinet Performance and Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from the University of Michigan, a Master of Music in Clarinet Performance from Indiana University and a D.M.A. in Clarinet Performance from the University of Wisconsin.

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