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Czech Phonic Poetry

Pavel Novotný

Brief orientation

The experimental poetry that emerged in the late 1950s and especially during the 1960s is commonly divided into two basic streams with various subtypes: visual (or optical) poetry and sound (or acoustic) poetry. In the acoustic field, a distinction can be made between two basic areas, or “gestures” in Franz Mon’s terms: the first is the gesture of *articulation*, and the second is the gesture of the *technical platform*, at that time mainly audio tape or analogue technology. In this sense, we can speak of *phonetic* and *phonic* poetry, based on an electronic platform. Phonetic poetry may be considered as part of phonic poetry, as a primary articulatory gesture that is further modified by the technical media.

Phonic poetry (or *poésie phonique*), tape poetry, and more generally sound poetry seek to liberate language from the mute medium of printed or written script, rehabilitating the ancient oral dimension of poetry, while also exploiting the new possibilities of acoustic media and making them an instrument *sui generis*. Between these two poles, that is, between primary orality and the acoustic medium, a wide range of possibilities extends, from purely articulatory compositions to essentially synthetic works and from the intelligible word to the non-semantic sound or tone. In the Czech or Czechoslovak context of the 1960s, the term *phonic poetry* (*fonická poezie*) became widespread. The term “tape poetry” would also be adequate, as it reflects the analogue media platform: the audio tape.

The existence or non-existence of phonic poetry (or avant-garde tendencies in general) in a given culture, country or nation is determined by many factors. In this context, the Czech poet Josef Hiršal reminds us that it is “very easy to trace who is from where and what background he has” (?eskoslovenský rozhlas 2013: 209); by this Hiršal means the cultural and national as well as the personal or emotional background of an author. With phonic poetry, production conditions also play an important role: technically complex and sonically pure compositions could not be realised at all if they were not supported by proper technical and institutional support, as well as a liberal creative atmosphere. Despite all kinds of complications, however, the Western scene had much better conditions than the Eastern Bloc scene, especially in terms of creative background and equipment.

Historical aspects

If we look into the Czech or Czechoslovak production of experimental poetry of the 1960s, we find that this scene is rich in visual and grammatically oriented experiments, but that sound production is much more modest. Phonic and radiophonic production in the Czechoslovak area, or indeed in the entire Eastern Bloc,

was rather difficult to promote. The lack of an institutional background, the long-lasting conservatism and rigidity of the radio medium are the basic reasons for the scarcity of truly complex phonic works and other radical radio experiments on the platform of mass media. This conservatism inheres both in the political context and in the radio aesthetics itself, which – even in its more experimental forms – was primarily oriented towards the content or metaphorical conception of the spoken word. Such an atmosphere did not offer the necessary conditions for the kind of extensive and open media discourse that took place in the West (most clearly articulated by Marshall McLuhan and subsequently by Friedrich Kittler). Even in the more or less liberal 1960s it was not in the interest of the ruling communist regime to understand mass media reflexively, analytically and critically and every activity that smelled of formalism was automatically suspect.

Media conservatism in Czechoslovakia prevented the penetration of radical experimental tendencies into the radio play. As such the interconnections between Concretism-based phonic poetry and the experimental radio play were almost non-existent in Czechoslovakia. The innovative tendencies in the field of the radio play manifested themselves merely as an enhancement of classical-illusory play, i.e. not as a radical shattering of an illusion into its material elements. The open structures and radical tape-experiments of phonic poetry, on the other hand, were not necessarily connected to professional studios. They were often created on an amateur or semi-amateur platform. In the early years of experimental poetry, this was also true for the West in the early attempts by the Pierre Garnier, Arrigo Lora-Totino, or Ernst Jandl for instance. From the point of view of production conditions, phonic poetry thus includes both complex studio creations (not so frequent on the Czech or Czechoslovak scene, but present nonetheless; see for example the Fylkingen Records radiophonic scene) and technically simpler experiments with the ordinary user reel-to-reel recorder. The key figures here are primarily authors associated with experimental poetry, namely Ladislav Novák, Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová, Jiří Valoch, Jiří Kolář or Václav Havel. The movement includes authors more or less associated with post-war surrealism, especially Milan Nápravník or Stanislav Dvorský.

Avant-garde strategies

A simple amateur tape recorder was not cheap at the beginning of the 1960s: Milan Nápravník, who acquired the device in the early 1960s, wrote about this in his private notes:

At that time, the Czechoslovak electronics factory, TESLA, began to produce the first Czechoslovak reel-to-reel tape recorders, which was almost a sensation, considering how hard the regime had hitherto prevented any reproduction technology (at that time mainly reproduction machines of the American brand “Xerox”) from falling into “unauthorized hands” even for a few minutes. The first Czechoslovak tape recorders were not cheap machines; one piece cost about three times the average monthly salary, but I was earning a little extra money at the time by writing scripts for trick films, and could therefore afford to buy one.

The ordinary home tape recorder, of course, offered nowhere near what studio technology did, and as an instrument, it was very cumbersome. It was difficult to compose on an amateur platform. Editing, mixing or cutting could be done only to a very limited extent. At the same time, the recording did not excel in any great sonic quality. Despite these financial and technical difficulties, amateur recording became, at least for a while, a welcome opportunity to create acoustically. It became a new alternative to (experimental) printed text. In addition, it was a way to circumvent censorship pressures: “the tape recording offers itself to us as a new, very unofficial poetic form at a time when the printed poem has to pass through a series of offices before it is permitted,” writes Novák in his unpublished Typescript (Novák: Osnova, unpub.). Particularly in the

first half of the 1960s, the audiotape was essentially a specific form of “samizdat,” a freely disseminated alternative to the printed medium. The recordings were distributed as part of the author’s correspondence and even internationally as unofficial editions (the most well-known but still unpublished is “Antologie 1962,” compiled by Milan Nápravník), as well as public presentations – evenings with listening, lectures and discussions.

Novák, occasionally Nápravník, and Stanislav Dvorský were active in the field of this unofficial media alternative. Novák was by far the most tenacious in this regard, producing dozens of phonic compositions between 1962 and 1973, most of them on an amateur platform (from 1962 the author used a Tesla Sonet Duo tape machine, and in 1969 he switched to a better Philips, which he purchased in Sweden). His audio production was partially motivated by his interest in magic, mysticism, and alchemy. In this sense his compositions can be seen as peculiar magic spells or rites projected into the modern platform: “And it is precisely modern technology” says Novák in his rare official broadcasting in 1969 “which enables a return to the birth of poetry, to where poetry at once resembled a song” (Novák 1969: 2). Regarding this search for roots, we can mention the fact that Novák was intensely interested in the art and poetry of indigenous populations (he translated Inuit and Native American poetry), which was directly reflected in his poetic (and phonic) work. Novák’s phonic compositions can also be understood in the context of his artistic works, where alchemy plays a significant role – one of his artistic techniques is called “alchymage” (“alchymáž”). In addition to these these creative factors, Novák was also influenced by Surrealism or Dadaism, as well as Concretist movements. Across his wide corpus of influences he tried to combine ancient traditions with new technologies to achieve a poetry that was adequate to the new era without losing touch with its origins.

Among Novák’s home recordings we can also find features of his later studio creations, even if most of the recordings are completely freestanding works. Many of the home recordings are in some ways perhaps even more interesting than the studio compositions: by having a raw, sensual character, the materiality of the home tape recorder medium emerges all the more strongly and appears in retrospect – precisely because of the low acoustic quality – more authentic than technically more sophisticated studio-productions. The author worked with a wide spectrum of expression, from purely articulate creations to more or less radical interventions in the recording. In spite of – or perhaps even because of – relying on simple, almost primitive techniques, Novák created original and significant works of art. On one of the tape reels we hear the afterword to the compositions from 1962-1963, with a description of the technical background of the early phonic experiments:

Dear listener, let me introduce myself. My name is Ladislav Novák, I am 37 years old. I live in Třebíč, on Nezvalova street number 44. On this tape, I’ll show you my first tape-recording experiments, which I recorded from January 21, 1962, to January 13, 1963. In all the recordings I based my work on spoken automatic text and mostly I made do with the simplest technique, that is with the spoken word and one tape recorder. Only in the recordings of “Strange Dream” and “Geology” I worked with two tape recorders, and even three tape recorders for “Nightwalker”. For the recording of “Letter from the Constellation of Scorpio,” I supplemented the tape recorder in several places with two radio receivers and a gramophone. Soon, I want to make more recordings, with a much more complex technique, in which I want to use reportage recordings from the streets, public rooms and so on. (Novotný 2022: Audio-Attachment, Track 1)

One of Novák’s dominant creative techniques is the method generally known as cut-up, which was used in the literary sphere by William S. Burroughs and in sound by Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. In the acoustic sphere, this random-based creative method is the simplest and mechanically least-invasive method of cutting. Using a pause or record/stop/rewind button, the original recording is overwritten by a new one at a given point; by switching off and on it is possible to insert a kind of sound interference into the original sound line,

adding more and more new ones, and thus gradually creating a very varied chain collage. By way of an example consider Novák's composition *Geology*, which the author introduces as follows:

Dear friends, for a long time I have longed to create a work of art that would come into being as nature itself does. A work that would emerge as geological alluvial deposits developing in the headwaters of great rivers. Which would be created over a long period completely randomly and yet lawfully according to all the laws of chance. For years my dream remained unrealizable and only the tape recorder came to my rescue. And so, one day, it was exactly on 14 September 1962, I put a tape into the tape recorder to record a not very long text. After a few weeks, maybe months, I went back to this text and played a second text over it. By keeping some parts of the original text, I erased others and played the new text over them. Then I played over this double text a third, fourth, fifth, and again, maybe even a sixth time, and again I put the tape away for several weeks. In the final stage, I used two tape recorders to blend the sounds, that is to say specifically the sounds of one tape recorder and my voice, together. This ended up producing a formation that is very much like what I wanted, that is, a geological alluvium. Let us now imagine that we are in the role of a geologist and that we want to explore all the veins, all the deposits of these psychological sediments. Perhaps we may find in it some interesting fossils, decals, of strange, fantastic animals long extinct, or only recently extinct. (Novotný 2022: Audio-Attachment, Track 9)

Novák also often worked to distort the recording by changing the speed, or even by reversing it. Particularly in the recording *Strange Dream*, one can recognise the speeding up or slowing down of the reel (probably by simply slowing it down once with a finger or by switching speeds). Novák often attempted to combine his creative techniques, using a combination of cut-ups and changes of speed: this is how the *Prepared Text of the Little Red Riding Hood* (*Preparovaný text o ?ervené Karkulce*) was created, in which two speeds, and thus two voices, alternate with sudden cuts. Similarly, in the composition *Nightwalker*, the composer achieved multi-layered structures that anticipate what he would later create in the studio. The early cycle *Letter from The Constellation of Scorpio*, based on his correspondence with Jiří Kolář, is technically varied. Here Novák already uses simple technical tricks (adding recordings of radio and slowed-down gramophone records) while at the same time playing with his own voice as a medium that – like any other reproduction media – can be “damaged” or impaired: he hums and hums, grunts, speaks with a stuffy nose, etc.

As a whole, Novák's amateur recordings seem raw and authentic, it could be argued that over time – confronted with the cleaned-up digital age – they become more and more impressive. From today's perspective, if Novák's “geological” metaphor is taken further, they can be perceived as ancient cave paintings, their acoustic rawness and technical imperfection speaking with the specific gesture of the analogue medium.

Of the studio recordings that tend to be included in Czech phonic poetry, the most famous are probably the two audio anthologies *Fragments 1963/1964*, which were recorded at the initiative of Milan Nápravník at the Lucerna Studio in Prague, with professional actors, albeit unofficially, on “night shifts”; as we have already mentioned, experimental literature based on linguistic or media reflection did not have the opportunity to make it into official studio productions and all studio experiments in the field of phonic poetry were more or less done on the sidelines.

Both sets were released by Nápravník and Dvorský in 2002 in digitised form on three CDs. On *Fragments 1963/4* we can find texts by Vratislav Effenberger, Bohumila Grögerová, Stanislav Dvorský, Věra Linhartová, Milan Nápravník and also Ladislav Novák. For the most part, however, these were simply read texts, albeit of an experimental nature. Novák's composition *Text for M.M.* can be classified as phonic poetry, working with the rhythmic recitation of nouns and verbs, saturated with iterative effects. Nápravník's

creations, which combine the metrics of text with electroacoustic echoes, also partially belong to the sphere of phonic poetry.

The most significant moment for Czech phonic poetry was the so-called *Semester of Experimental Creation* in 1969. This gathering was organised in the *Experimental Studio* in Liberec, located in a neo-Romantic villa on Alšova Street. Most of the works produced during this Semester should be considered central to Czech auditive and phonic poetry of the 1960s. The opportunity to create auditive poetry in Liberec truly arrived at the last possible moment: during the Soviet occupation, right before so-called *normalization* (which resulted in the destruction of the liberal atmosphere and the darkening of conditions in politics, media and culture). Of course, the gathering of German- and Czech-speaking experimental poets was organised on the periphery of the official recording industry. Planned international guests included Gerhard Rühm, Ernst Jandl, Pierre Garnier, Franz Mon and Reinhard Döhl. The Participation was, probably because of the turbulent geopolitical situation, markedly lower than expected – the only international guest was finally Gerhard Rühm. The Czech authors who took part were Josef Hiršal, Bohumila Grögerová, Jiří Kolář, Ladislav Novák as well as Václav Havel. The original recordings made during this gathering were probably liquidated or deleted in the 1970s by the regime, during “normalization”. Thanks to several fortunate circumstances, however, most of the works were saved through other private means and so we still have access to 20 compositions from the production of the Semester.

Václav Havel’s audio collage *Bohemia beautiful, Bohemia mine* (*řechy krásné, řechy mé*) is probably the most well-known of all the compositions made in Liberec. It is a project critical of the times which reacts openly to the Soviet occupation and also, in Havel’s characteristic manner, has elements of absurdist drama. Havel made use of recordings of speeches by Czech and Slovakian politicians, focusing on the period from the end of the First Czechoslovak Republic to the Soviet occupation at the end of the sixties. The composition brought the speeches and political statements into provocative and humorous contexts; the series of cut Original sound (O-Ton) recordings are combined with an old, kitschy patriotic song *Bohemia Beautiful, Bohemia mine* and with recordings of the burping and mouth-smacking noises. Using those auditive confrontations, this collage turns into a slap-stick and absurd piece, but also into a powerful document and memento of the time.

Ladislav Novák produced a total of four compositions in the Liberec studio. And it’s not an exaggeration to say, that these works belong to the canon of the European neo avant-garde in the area of phonic art. Novák was able to work directly in many dimensions of the new acoustic medium: in sound editing, cutting, rhythms, cross-fades, or various deformations. All four of Novák’s compositions produced in Liberec are today freely available on the internet, although not as domestic releases but only thanks to foreign record labels. Maybe the most complex and also most interesting composition from Novák’s pieces made in Liberec is *Liquefaction of the Geometer Descartes and His Further Life in Fluid Form* (*Zkapalnění geometra Descarta a jeho další život v tekutém skupenství*). This creation works with all available means of sound processing in a Novák’s alchemistic manner. The Cartesian thesis “I think, therefore I am” undergoes multiple variations and extensions, based on the modification “I speak, therefore I am.” The result of all these transformations is not the act of being by thinking but the act of modern being by modulated speech, or more precisely: by the articulation and its further manipulation in the acoustic medium. In the end, you can hear: “I am only what and how I speak.”

Unlike Novák or Havel, the compositions of Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová, as well as those of Jiří Kolář, were based on the processing of the visual text, on its translation into acoustic form. Probably the most interesting example in this context is the creation based on Kolář’s visual text *Between Day and Night* (*Mezi dnem a nocí*), which uses the rich possibilities of sound collage and also a wide register of prefabricated sounds, the so-called O-Ton elements. Also original is Rühm’s composition *Censored Speech* (*Zensurierte Rede*), which projects the phenomenon of censorship by radically desemantizing, the acoustic material. It leaves only the beginnings and ends of the words, as it were, hollowing out their interior. Censorship is thus directly projected into the destructive paradigm of the composition.

While the gathering in Liberec is perhaps the most significant moment of Czech phonic poetry there are other key moments to consider. Similar to Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal and Ladislav Novák, Jiří Valoch was well versed in the context of sound creation: he had a friendship with Henri Chopin and other authors of phonic compositions, and he had a rather diverse collection of recordings for his time. In the 1970s he organised an exhibition of scores by various domestic and international composers, which was later translated into book form in the publication *Partitury (Scores)*. Some interesting studio experiments were executed in 1969 by Jiří Valoch in Brno. Three phonic compositions were recently discovered in the archives.

In those creations, Valoch transfers the principles of minimal music to the work with language. For example, in the composition *Aus jedem Satz* (which works with German language material), two overlaid and multiplied recordings are mixed to create a mutually variable phase shift and thus variable rhythms and harmonies. Filtering here essentially replaces stereo, which was apparently not available: one recording has the highs filtered out, the other the lows, making the two components more acoustically distinguishable. This phonic poem is thus in fact a conglomerate of aleatoric consonances and overlaps, not only on an acoustic basis but also on a semantic one, as the meaning of words is blurred, broken up, multiplied, etc. by phase shifts. Valoch's further creations *Variation* and *Transformation* work in a similar way. In the latter work, the author makes compositional use of the element of increasing noise, the disappearance of the word in the media traffic; the tension between the articulated word and its technical platform is thus maximised.

In the context of Czech phonic poetry, international cooperation is also relevant. Between 1968-1971, Josef Hiršal, Bohumila Grögerová and Milan Nápravník collaborated with West German radio, especially with WDR. In the case of Hiršal and Grögerová, the concept of phonic poetry even developed into the more complex form of radio plays. Similarly, successful purely phonic compositions were recorded abroad by Ladislav Novák. In 1969 he had the opportunity to participate in a symposium of phonic poetry in Sweden, in the Stockholm studio Fylkingen at Sveriges Radios, which brought together a rich palette of global authors of phonic poetry, and in 1968 and 1977 it served as a dominant platform for both auditory poetry and sound art. Novák was able to record two creations in the studio: the Latin *Vita Humana* and the French *Le miroir aux alouettes*. These compositions are particularly important in his work and for Czech phonic poetry in general in that they are the only ones to use stereophonic techniques.

Novák's first composition consists of a variable rhythmic confrontation of the well-known, contradictory sayings "festina lente" and "sero venientibus ossa." The two elements meet in various ways in acoustic multiplication, colliding or overtaking each other in stereophonic space. In this way, the human journey of life appears as a constant balancing act between rushing and slowing down, between stress and rest. The image of a man appears here as a constant existential oscillation between hurry and rest, in an infinite number of possible encounters and variations. The three-minute creation *Le miroir aux alouettes* works with an opposite strategy: the stereo is used here not as a free playing field, but as a spatiotemporal platform possessing a specific geometry of a lark trap. The precise focus of the target in the mirrors of the stereo occurs at the moment when the variously inverted, distorted text is pieced together step by step into a meaningful message: through the clarity of meaning and the simultaneous concentration in the central field of the stereo base, the hitherto freely and abstractly flying larks are condemned to death. . This work may be considered as one of the most interesting compositions in the field of phonic poetry because of the complex interweaving of form, content and the staged materiality of the medium.

Avant-garde thought

Phonic poetry can be seen as part of the Concretist tendencies in art, as this trend emphasises the material components of the word and its medium, moving away from traditional reproduction to production.

Here the word is not merely a carrier of meaning, but also a sonic, musical element, noise or movement. Similar to visual or tactile poetry, phonic poetry can be understood as a part of the so-called “expanded poetics” (Gerhard Rühm), “new poetry” (Zdeněk Barborka) or also “poetry of new consciousness” (Hiršal, Grögerová) – i.e. tendencies that seek to transcend the boundaries of traditional poetic production. Phonic poetry or phonetic poetry is based on the fact that in the age of new media, it is appropriate to expand the register of practices and media platforms, that poetic creation does not have to be boiled down in the mute medium of the printed book but can step out of it.

In examining this genre, then, it is important to remember that, like other neo-avant-garde tendencies, phonic poetry is bound to international lines as well as to the influences of a given national tradition, language, culture or even politics. Czech phonic poetry (as a part of experimental tendencies) is characterised by the fact that on the one hand, it absorbed influences from Germany, France, Italy, Great Britain, and even Latin America, but at the same time it shows certain specific features – sometimes it is an instrument of political satire or even provocation (see, for example, Havel’s composition *Bohemia beautiful, Bohemia mine*, or Novák’s *Le miroir aux alouettes*), other times it is characterised by a sense of humour. Tape poetry represents on the one hand a closed historical chapter, on the other hand, it can be seen as one of the possible starting points for contemporary Sound Art or Radio Art. In contrast to these relatively new trends, phonic poetry has clear boundaries: it is not abstract music or free sound art: it is sign-based. Its de-semantisation and abstraction must not be total if it is still to speak poetically. In this tension between abstraction and linguistic sign, auditive poetry is still inspiring today. It is precisely this tension between abstraction and linguistic sign that characterises Czech neo-avant-garde phonic poetry of the 1960s, and there is still much to be discovered both in terms of its singularities and its interconnections with international developments.

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