

CHARLOTTE MARTINŮ (1894 - 1978) - A FAITHFUL HEART

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I developed a special passion for Martinů quite early; I was a student of 20 in 1971 and already knew all the records which were available at the time in Paris or London. Since the very beginning, he appeared to me as « the composer of my life »; I had never heard any music by him in concert until this day of November 1972 where the *String Quartet N°3 H (183)* was performed in the Salle Gaveau; indeed I was there... During the interval, I heard somebody say: « *look, this is Charlotte Martinů !* ». I was very surprised, ignoring she was still alive; I immediately went to the beautiful old lady to introduce myself and express my love for the music of her husband. She was at once happy and friendly, and invited me to write and to visit her at her home in Vieux Moulin.

I need not say I responded very quickly to this very kind invitation.

This was the beginning of a relation which lasted 6 years, very much grand mother to grand son (indeed she was a little older than my own grandmothers).



Charlotte Martinů in 70ties in Polička, Czech Republic

VISITS TO VIEUX MOULIN

Many times, I went to visit her to this small house in Vieux-Moulin, near Compiègne (60 km North of Paris) she inherited from her aunt Angèle, and where they had spent many months after the war¹.

The first time I went, she told me « *you have the same size as him !* »; and indeed I am, very exactly with my 1.86 m. At the time, I was also just as thin as he was during all his life.

It is easy to imagine my feelings when I was surrounded by so many things which had been in Martinů's environment.

In particular, this very big cupboard, full of scores, letters, tapes and records, was quite the treasure island²...

We spent hours speaking, listening to music (on the latest Supraphon recordings, which were not available in France, but which I got through Charlotte as soon as issued), including old tapes of concerts which revealed to me some masterpieces not yet recorded like a Vienna Festival performance of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (H351) under Paul Sacher in 59 which, despite the terrible sound quality, conveys an incredible, unequaled strength to this great work.³

She gave me a few personal objects of Martinů, like the tray were he set his pens, and some sketches. She gave me the original manuscript score of *Písničky na jednu stránku* (*Songs on one page*) (H 294) written in New York in 1943).

I also helped her to write legends on her photo albums, because my writing was small enough for that. So, we revived together all the more or less happy memories of their extraordinary life.

She showed me her garden and all the latest changes she did there.

Unfortunately, she refused any pictures of her to be taken, so I have no direct testimony of these blessed hours⁴.

The afternoon generally ended with a good dinner nearby, with her great nephew, Alain Bécourt, who was during all these years the kindest and most devoted driver and helped her in every occasion.

The vicar of Vieux-Moulin, Père Verbrugge, who was also a well known archeologist, and had been a faithful friend for many years, also attended the dinners.

Although he was not passionate with music, he asked me to record a tape which could permanently play Martinů's music in his church.



Vieux-Moulin

CONCERTS - SPECIAL OCCASIONS

I went in some occasions to concerts with Charlotte Martinů⁵; unfortunately, Martinů's music was very rarely played at the time in France, and I am forced to say this has not much been improved since then, despite the action of people like the musicologist Guy Erisman, who published in 1990 the first, and notable biography in French about the composer⁶.

In 1990, there was a marked interest towards Martinů in his 100th year, which did not last enough to establish him definitely in France as one of the major 20th century composers.

Two occasions have been especially memorable:

The first one was in Rouen, where *The Greek Passion* (H 372) was performed in March 1973. The event in itself was outstanding being also it was the French Première, and my passion was reinforced by the impact of the live performance⁷. Besides Charlotte, an other presence made the concert very special: Eleni, the widow of Kazantzakis, a writer among my favourites, was here too.

The second one happened in August 1974, when Charlotte made her usual pilgrimage to Schönenberg, the Sacher's estate near Basle; I was living in Alsace at the time, so I joined Charlotte and her nephew directly at the Sachers.

My old Citroën « 2 CV » took place near the Rolls Royces, and we were greeted with extreme kindness by Paul Sacher; the atmosphere was a little more tense with Maja Sacher, because Charlotte had just decided that Bohuslav body would be transferred to Polička after her own death. He had been buried in the park of Schönenberg and Maja had much difficulty to accept this decision⁸.



Bohuslav Martinů's temporary grave in Schönenberg, Switzerland

The house contains one of the most extraordinary collection of 20th century paintings you can imagine. When I was going ecstatically from room to room, Rostropovitch joined us; he seemed extremely happy to meet Charlotte, saying he was playing the Sonatas quite often to himself (sad that he does not play them in concert or on record). He asked me if no unknown Concerto existed. After all, *Cello Concerto N° 2 (H302)*, had only come to light 9 years before; no doubt Sláva could have championned it and made it known all over the world - even if Saša Večtomov deserved to get this masterpiece). I could only tell him that nothing new could be offered.

In the same evening, we were in Lucerne, where Firkušný played the *Fantaisie et Toccata (H 281)*; the presence of Kubelík, the deep affection both showed towards Charlotte crowned a day entirely unique in my memories.

CHARLOTTE AND BOHUŠ

Bohuš and Charlotte Quennehen met in Paris, at a Médrano circus performance, in 1926; they were 36 and 32, which means they were not exactly young things, even if Martinů at the time was still a kind of student; anyway he certainly behaved like a one in his eager desire to learn and breathe a different air in Paris. The life they had together for some 33 years has certainly not been always an easy one. Charlotte was asked by friends to write about this life and she did in a small book ⁹, a task which exhausted her; she tells with the greatest simplicity how tough their material life can have been, especially at the beginning of the war. They had 6 different addresses in Paris in 13 years, some of them very uncomfortable.

Certainly, the fact that she accepted continuing to work as a dressmaker, even in the American years, until the beginning of the 1950's allowed Martinů to spend most of his time composing, and so he was not forced to earn his living as a teacher or an instrumentalist. Therefore, we can be immensely grateful for so many masterpieces Charlotte's work allowed to be born; she also created an environment without any day to day cares which would have made creative work difficult.

Because, if Martinů created music like a tree makes leaves, or a spring gives water, he needed peace and concentration to work.

What did they have in common ?

Indeed, reading Charlotte's memories, you would think they had almost everything in common; in particular, a very deep love for nature, a great simplicity in their behaviour and their way of life. Simplicity in life, simplicity in music¹⁰.

Official honours were not at all what they liked, and Charlotte only accepted them as a recognition of Bohuslav as a genius, and she was immensely proud of him.



Bohuslav and Charlotte Martinů in New York in 40ties

However, her memories do not mention the storms they had to face in their domestic life. In all our discussions at the end of her life, she did not mention anything; but as, at the time, I was not aware of anything, I am not sure I would have understood any allusion.

If Martinů was a simple man, there was obviously a completely different facet in his personality; the dreamer was also a great reader, very keen of philosophy, a companion of the most advanced artistic tendencies, in literature, painting just as well as music; easy to be convinced when you know who were his friends, and the kind of librettos which inspired him. All this was certainly far from Charlotte's understanding; even in music, she had no culture. Martinů said with humour that when they had met, she did not know the name of Wagner ! Her love for Martinů's music only reflected her love for the man and became after his death her only reason for living.

Thus, it was probably difficult to avoid crisis.

Two are well known: firstly his life-long love for Viteslava Kapralova, his young, very gifted pupil from home, in Paris from 1937 to 1939. When she saw that their relation had no possible future, she decided to go her own way with the writer Jiri Mucha ¹¹; she married him in April 1940, when already seriously ill, and died from miliary tuberculosis a few weeks later, tragically young: she was just 25.

The second one, the Roe Barstow affair in America from 1946 to 1952, lasted longer and reached a very serious point, disputes with Charlotte being very frequent and dramatic. Charlotte almost gave up several times, going back to France alone which was not a problem since she never got accustomed to America and New York life. She went to Prague in the Spring of 1947 to represent the composer for a series of concerts. Martinů himself had not been in Czechoslovakia since 1938 and would never return. During the war, his mother and his friend Stáňa (Stanislav) Novák died ¹².

These great losses, the political uncertainties in his country, his dramatic accident at Tanglewood in July 1946 and Roe... This was too much for him to decide about future.

Finally, after long indecisive periods, Martinů seemed to choose Charlotte.

It is quite interesting to notice that, since the *Huit Préludes H181* for piano of 1929 dedicated to *Miss Charlotte Quennehen*, Martinů did not dedicate any work to his wife until the *7th String Quartet in 1947 (Concerto da Camera)* (H 314). Did this mean a kind of cease-fire at the time the fight was at a peak ?

Even more significant is the dedication of *Les Bouquinistes du Quai Malaquais (H 319) à ma femme Charlotte*, written in 1948 shortly before their return to Europe ¹³.

For two more years, Charlotte and Bohus lived alternatively on both sides of the Atlantic, together or separately. Bohuslav saw Roe quite often, in Europe or in America.

After 1952, they did some shorter stays in the US: Roe was definitely out of his life.

It seems that the rest of their life together was more peaceful; they had quite an easy life, thanks to the friendship of patrons like Paul and Maja Sacher, Karl and Margrit Weber and his growing reputation.

They shared their time between Rome, Nice, Schönenberg...

She liked to tell about one of the happiest holidays they had together, in Royan (on the French Atlantic coast) in 1958¹⁴.

LIVING WITHOUT BOHUŠ

When Charlotte Martinů died in Vieux Moulin, a small village in the forest of Compiègne, on November 23d, 1978, she was 84 and had been a widow for almost 20 years. Charlotte had devoted all her energy to his music after his death.

She lived in Vieux Moulin, and suffered a lot from the ingratitude of her compatriots who ignored such a composer who had chosen France for so many years.

In compensation, Czechoslovakia very quickly considered him as one of its greatest men, which was far from being evident as Martinů had been so long abroad and had refused to come back in the post-war artistic and political context of his beloved homeland. Martinů was even accused to be a « French » composer, and there were lots of controversies around his appointment as Professor of Composition at the Prague Conservatory after the war¹⁵.

He was very concerned by such critics, and wrote in 1944:

One thing goes with all my life, it is the critic of the French influence being considered as a reproach regarding my creation. My stay in France and all that it brought to me, is regarded as a sin; in each composition, they judge whether I got rid of it or not. It is a proof of a lack of understanding, but also of the will not to understand¹⁶.

Interestingly, in an interview¹⁷, Firkusny states very firmly that:

« when Martinů was abroad, he was even more Czech than when he was at home »¹⁸ and that « if you want to draw a continuous line of composers in Czech music, it is Smetana-Dvorak-Janacek-Martinů ».

Charlotte was greeted in Czechoslovakia as a queen, but never accepted the offer to stay, because the country was too different for her: she understood very little Czech and she was absolutely allergic to the political regime.

She had much to do with music publishers, in particular Boosey & Hawkes, a difficult task for her for which she was not prepared, but she was advised by competent friends. She had frequent visitors, and for instance she devoted much efforts to help Harry Halbreich in his classification work, for which he was given the manuscript of the *Symphony N° 4 (H 305)* by her as a reward for his work.¹⁹

Many were young musicians, which made her very happy. But she complained that most disappeared once they had got what they wanted. Faithful friends included Palenicek and Mihule, or the musicologist Pierre Vidal. In her 6 last years, all the letters she wrote to me show constant travels, projects, visitors, an enthusiasm incredible for a woman of 80 and more. All the friends from Martinů's time disappeared; the death of Munch was a blow in 1969, and I remember her sadness when the painter Zrzavy died in 1977.

« August 23d, 1978

My very dear friend,

Thank you so much for the great kindness of your Birthday²⁰ wishes. I am so happy that everything is well for you, you have a pleasant life with all the things and people you love.

On my side, I must say I suffer a lot from my legs with this bad arthrosis; I went to the masseur in Compiègne, but he says my bones are in very bad condition; as I am too old for an operation, I must stay with my pain.

But I have good news: for the anniversary of his death, a record company wants to make Juliette in French; I'll let you know.

Yes, I received the Second Symphony by Neumann. They want to make them all.

I kiss you with all my heart. Your faithful Charlotte. »

« October 9th, 1978

Thank you so much for your beautiful card from Ceylon.

I have bad news for you: on September 15th, I fell in the garden and broke my left arm.

I am presently at Alain's father. They say I could go in a rest home near Chantilly. All these concerts cancelled for me: there is one in Gaveau, one in Théâtre des Champs Elysées with Neumann..

I kiss you with all my heart and many warm thoughts to your dear family.

Tomorrow, I'm writing to Mihule. Your faithful Charlotte. »

Charlotte died 6 weeks later.

A few days after, a funeral service was held in the small church of Vieux Moulin by Père Verbrugge.

But there was no coffin in the church, since Charlotte's body had already been buried in Polička; later, Martinů's rests have been transferred from the park of Schönenberg, to Polička in August 1979, for the 20th anniversary of his death.

This was Charlotte will, even if this was very painful for Maja Sacher.

A handful of faithful French friends and officials from the Czech embassy attended the service, thinking about the incredible energy of this old woman, not in very good health these last few years.

The small house is still there; besides the door, a bronze plate (present from the Czech Music Fundation) reminds us that Charlotte « lived there, tirelessly devoted, working to honor the artistic legacy of her husband in the years 1960 to 1978 ».



Small house in Vieux-Moulin with the bronze plate

1 I am not sure which house it is; not her mother's, certainly, so I would guess it is the house of Angèle Quennhen.

2 Since the death of Charlotte Martinů, all this material has been taken to Policka.

3 In 1974, I took a score of this work to the conductor Antonio de Almeida; unfortunately, he did not have the opportunity to give a performance.

4 However, she gave me two pictures of her taken at a concert in Prague where she looks exactly as when I knew her.

5 The composer Henri Dutilleux attended faithfully most of the concerts where Martinů was played.

6 Erisman, Guy : *Martinů, Un musicien à l'éveil des sources* Actes Sud, 1990

7 Paris had to wait until April 1990 to see the first performance of this masterpiece !

8 The question of the return of Martinů's body became both the obsession and a nightmare for her last years. She thought this would fulfil the reconciliation of Martinů with his country; but she was accused to be too favourable to a communist government, which was nonsense. However, the Communists did make political propaganda about the return.

9 Charlotte Martinů, *Ma vie avec Bohuslav Martinů*, also published as *Můj život s Bohuslavem Martinů*, Prague, Editio Supraphon, 1978, Editio Bärenreiter, 2003, *My Life with Bohuslav Martinů*, Prague, Orbis, 1978.

10 *What I maintain as my deepest conviction is the essential greatness of things and thoughts which are very simple* ». Cited by Pierre Vidal in the monthly journal *Ecouter, Voir*, April 1990.

11 He was the son of the painter Alfons Mucha

12 Stanislav Novák had been leader of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra under Václav Talich. He and Martinů had been friends since their student days in Prague.

13 This exuberant work shows the intense desire to be back in Europe, and especially in Paris.

14 As a boy of 7, I spent holidays there...Did I meet the composer in the last year of his life ?

15 His particular love of Debussy's music also emphasised his resistance to any German influences, feeling the French culture was closer to the Czech soul and nearer to the attitude of Leoš Janáček

16 Cited by Anne-Marie Morand in *Ecouter, Voir* - April 1990

17 Shown in the 1987 television film by Edmond Levy for France 3 and Czech TV. This also contains a valuable and moving contribution from Paul Sacher; it is possible to hear Charlotte's voice in an interview shortly before her death, describing the dramatic events of 1940.

18 Whoever knows the three cantatas based on words of Miloslav Bureš, *Otvírání studánek* (H 354) of 1955, *Legenda z dýmu bramborové nati* (H 360) of 1956 and *Mikeš z hor* (H 375), will understand this statement

19 Halbreich, Harry: Bohuslav Martinů, Werkverzeichnis, Dokumentation und Bibliographie, Zürich, Atlantis Verlag, 1968. She was disappointed that she had no further contact with him after this time
20 Her 84th and last birthday, on 21st July 1978.