Tomas Svoboda (1939-2022)

By Marilyn Shotola

Tomáš Svoboda was an internationally renowned composer, performer, professor, and conductor. He composed over two hundred works, including six symphonies; orchestral, choral, and vocal works; and diverse works for large and small ensembles, string quartets, and solo instruments, especially piano. His compositional style often combines Slavic folk elements with complex meters and rhythms in a contemporary Classical structure, creating an intense, vibrant effect. Neal Gittleman, artistic director and conductor of the Dayton Philharmonic, called him “one of the great composers of our time.” Over fifty of his compositions have been recorded, and there have been more than thirteen hundred performances of his works throughout the world.

Svoboda was born in Paris on December 6, 1939, of Czech parents. His mother, Milada, was an artist, and his father, Antonin, was a professor at the Czech Technical University, head of research at the Institute of Mathematical Machines, and an accomplished pianist. After escaping from Czechoslovakia at the beginning of World War II, the family lived in Boston, where three-year-old Tomáš started piano lessons with his father. After the war, the family moved to Prague, where Svoboda studied at the Prague Conservatory. He graduated in 1962 with degrees in percussion, composition and conducting and was recognized as a piano virtuoso.

In 1964, the family fled the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia and returned to the United States. Svoboda’s fiancé, the artist Jana Demartini, escaped in 1965, and they were married in Phoenix, Arizona. They would have two children. In 1966, Svoboda entered the University of Southern California, where he earned a master’s degree in composition and studied with composer and teacher Halsey Stevens. “It was almost embarrassing to have him come to lessons,” Stevens remembered, “with work that needed almost nothing in the way of criticism.”

Svoboda moved to Portland with his wife and small son in 1970 to teach in the Music Department at Portland State University. He taught composition, counterpoint, and theory for twenty-seven years, while continuing to compose and perform. He retired from Portland State in 1998. In addition to nature, some of the passions that shaped Svoboda’s life were his love of family, hunting mushrooms, and playing chess at a master’s level. For fifty years he kept a daily record of local weather.

It was the natural world that was Svoboda’s major source of inspiration. His opus one, a piano piece written when he was nine years old, is titled *A Bird,* and his first symphony, written at age sixteen, is titled *Of Nature.* His Symphony No. 2, dedicated to his wife Jana, was originally scheduled by the Czech Philharmonic to be performed in 1964 but had been canceled when Svoboda and his parents escaped the country. The Portland Youth Philharmonic performed the premiere of the work on November 12, 2016.

Svoboda was involved in many Oregon Symphony concerts, some as conductor of his own works and some as keyboardist. In July 2003, the symphony released an *All Svoboda* orchestral CD featuring *Overture of the Season*, *Symphony No. 1* and the *Marimba Concerto*, which received a 2003 Grammy Award nomination. The symphony commissioned and performed his *Vortex* in 2009.

The recipient of numerous awards, Svoboda was honored with the Governor’s Arts Award in 1992. In 1985, he was named Composer of the Year by the Washington and Oregon Music Teachers Associations for *Children’s Treasure Box,* his collection of piano compositions for children. At Portland State University, he was awarded the Branford Price Millar Award for Faculty Excellence in 1983. Svoboda’s works were recorded on several labels, including Albany, Artisie 4, Centaur, Innova, Crystal, First Edition, and especially North Pacific Music, Which Produced his *Twelve String Quartets* performed by the Czech Martinu Quartet.

Tomáš Svoboda suffered a stroke in 2012, which paralyzed his right side but left his memory intact. After ten years of care by Jana, he died on November 17, 2022.

Sources

"Thomas Svoboda." Oregon Art Beat, Oregon Public Broadcasting. Film, 2006.

Choban, Maria. "Tomas Svoboda, Oregon's Invisible Composer." Oregon ArtsWatch, March 12, 2014.

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https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/svoboda_tomas/